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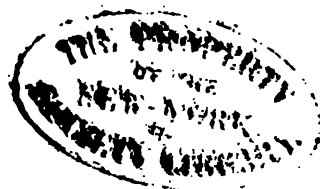








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“She must have seen everything.”—Page 13

—Frontispiece

*The Corner House*

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# *The* CORNER HOUSE

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By *FRED M. WHITE*

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Author of "The Crimson Blind," "The Weight of the Crown"

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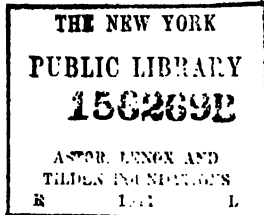
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1906



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*"The Corner House"*

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## THE CORNER HOUSE



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## CHAPTER I

### THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

A BRILLIANT light streamed from the open doorway of No. 1, Lytton Avenue, making a lane of flame across the pavement, touching pinched gaunt faces that formed a striking contrast to the dazzling scene within. Outside it was cold and wet and sodden, inside was warmth, the glitter of electrics on palms and statuary and flowers, a sliding kaleidoscope of beautiful dresses. A touch of this grateful warmth came soft and perfumed down the steps, and a drawn Lazarus huddled in his rags and shivered.

"What's all this mean?" he growled to an equally indigent neighbour. There was a clatter and clash of harness as carriage after carriage drove up. "This ain't quite Park Lane, guv'nor."

"Anyway, it's the fashion," the other growled hoarsely. "I ought to know because I used to be one of them before the accursed drink—but that is another story. Ever heard of the Countess Lalage?"

"Oh, that's it. Lovely woman with a romantic history. Rich as thingamy, been proposed to by all the dukes what ain't married already. Read it in one of the evening papers."

Poverty and want were jostling with well dressed content on the pavement. It was one of the strangest and most painful contrasts that can be seen in the richest city in the world. And the contrast was heightened by the meanness of the Corner House.

Black, dark, deserted, grimy shuttered windows—a suggestion of creeping mystery about it. Time ago the Corner House was the centre of what might have been a thrilling tragedy. Some of the older neighbours could tell of a cry in the night, of the tramping of feet, of a beautiful woman with the poison still in her hand, of the stern, dark husband who said never a word, though the shadow of the scaffold lay heavily upon him.

Since then the Corner House looked down with blank shuttered eyes on the street. None had ever penetrated its mystery, nobody had crossed its threshold from that day to this. The stern dark man had disappeared; he had locked up his house and gone, leaving not so much as a caretaker behind.

Strange that this dark, forbidding house should stand cheek by jowl with all that was modern and frivolous and fashionable. Even in the garden behind Lytton Avenue the corner house frowned with sightless eyes out of its side windows, eerie and creeping in the daytime.

But the heedless throng of fashionables recked nothing of this. The Countess Lalage was their latest craze. Who she was or where she came from nobody knew nor cared. She was young and wonderfully beautiful in a dashing Southern way, her equipages were an amazement to the park; she must have been immensely rich, or she would never have entertained as she did. There must

have been a Count Lalage at one time, for generally a pretty little girl rode with the Countess, and this child was her daughter. The Countess spoke casually of large South American concessions and silver mines, so that Oxford Street and Regent Street bowed down and worshipped her.

She had purchased No. 1, Lytton Avenue, just as it stood from an American millionaire who had suddenly tired of Society. Paragraphs in the cheap Society papers stated with awe that the sale had been settled in five minutes, so that on the spot this wonderful Countess Lalage had signed a cheque for more than two hundred thousand pounds.

She stood now at the head of the marble staircase, a screen of palms behind her, receiving her guests. If she were an adventuress, as some of the critics hinted, she carried it off wonderfully well. If so she was one of the finest actresses in the world. A black silk dress perfectly plain showed off her dark flashing beauty to perfection. She wore a diamond spray and tiara ; a deep red rose at her breast looked like a splash of blood. Truly, a magnificent woman !

She had an easy word and a graceful speech for every one. An old diplomatist, watching her earnestly, went away muttering that she must be to the manner born. Her smile was so real and caressing, but it deepened now, and the red lips quivered slightly as a bright-eyed, square-headed young man came up the steps and bowed over her hand.

"So you came, after all, Dr. Bruce ? " she said playfully. She pressed his hand gently, her eyes were soft and luminous on his face. Any man whose

affections had not been pledged elsewhere would have felt his pulses leaping. "Why?"

"Need you ask?" Gordon Bruce said gallantly. "You are my patroness, you know. Your word is final in everything. And since you declared at a fashionable gathering that Dr. Gordon Bruce was the man for nerve-troubles I have found it necessary to hire a second horse."

The dark eyes grew more caressing. A more vain man would have been flattered. To be the husband of Countess Lalage meant much, to be master of all this wealth and splendour meant more. But the quiet elation in Bruce's tones was not for the Countess, if she only knew it.

The flowing tide of satin and silks and lace sweeping up the staircase swept young Gordon Bruce along. He passed through the glittering rooms faint with the perfume of roses. There was a dim corridor full of flowers and shaded lights. Gordon Bruce looked anxiously about him. A glad light came into his eyes.

## CHAPTER II

### HETTY

THE figure of a girl rose out of a bower of palms and ferns and stood before Gordon Bruce with a shy welcome in her violet eyes. Just for a moment Bruce found himself contrasting this fresh English beauty with the Lalage Southern loveliness to the detriment of the latter. There was a purity and sweetness, a wonderful tenderness of expression about Hetty Lawrence that had always appealed to Bruce.

He had known the Countess Lalage's governess for years. He admired her independence of character, too, though on the whole he would have preferred her taking the home that her uncle Gilbert Lawrence, the great novelist, was ever urging upon her. But she would have a home of her own soon.

"Gordon, I am so glad you have come," she whispered. "I have stolen away for half an hour as Mamie is better. If she wants me I have told the nurse——"

"She can't want you half so badly as I do," Gordon laughed as he bent down and kissed the shy lips. "And that queer little creature will have to learn to do without you altogether before long."

Four new patients to-day, Hetty. And I *have* taken the house in Green-Street."

"Can we really afford it?" Hetty asked anxiously.

Bruce kissed her again. He loved that little pathetic, anxious look of hers. He spoke confidently of the time when Harley Street should be theirs. There was a strength and reliance about her lover that always comforted Hetty.

"I shall be glad," she whispered, after a thoughtful pause, "glad to get away from here."

"That's flattering to me. But I thought you liked the Countess."

Hetty glanced fearfully around her. Nobody was near—only the palms and the scented roses could hear her confidences.

"I have tried," she confessed, "and I have failed. She fascinates and yet repels me. There is some strange mystery about her. Gordon, I feel sure that there is the shadow of some great crime on her house. It sounds weak, hysterical, perhaps, but I can't get it out of my mind."

"But, darling, the Countess has been a good friend to me."

"I know. You are strong and ambitious, and she is helping to make you the fashion. But has it ever struck you why?"

"Perhaps it is because she has the good taste to like me," Gordon laughed.

"Because she loves you," said Hetty, in a thrilling whisper. "Because her whole heart and soul is given over to a consuming passion for you. There is a woman who would go any length to win a man's love. If a husband stood in the way she would poison him; if a woman, she would be

destroyed. Gordon, I am frightened; I wake up in the middle of the night trembling. I wish you had never come here; I don't know what I wish."

Gordon looked down into the troubled violet eyes with amazement. Surely he would wake up presently and find that he had been dreaming. Countess Lalage with all the world at her feet, and he a struggling doctor. Oh, it was preposterous! And yet little words and signs and hints unnoticed at the time were coming to his mind now.

"I wish you hadn't told me this," he murmured, uneasily. "It would have been far——"

He paused. From overhead somewhere came the sound of a frightened, wailing cry, the pitiful call of a child in terror. Hetty was on her feet in a moment, all her fears had gone to the winds.

"Mamie," she exclaimed. "Of course, nurse has crept off to the rest of the servants. Poor little wee frightened soul."

Hetty flashed off down the corridor, and was gone leaving Bruce to his troubled thoughts. Just before going, Hetty stood on her toes, and kissed her lover lightly on the lips. It was, perhaps, a good-night caress, for there was a chance that she might not return.

There was a sound at the top of the corridor, just the suggestion of a swish of silken drapery, and Gordon Bruce half turned. Under a cluster of electric lights stood Leona Lalage; she must have seen everything. It might have been fancy, it might have been a guilty conscience, but just for the moment Countess Lalage seemed transformed into a white fury with two murderous demons gleaming in her dark restless eyes. Then her silk



and ivory fan fell from her hands, and Gordon hastened to recover it.

When he looked up again the mask of evil passions was gone. The Countess was smiling in her most fascinating manner. Gordon could not know that the long filbert nails had cut through the woman's glove, and were making red sores on the pink flesh. He did not know that he would have stood in peril of his life had there been a weapon near at hand.

"You must not flirt with my governess, Dr. Bruce," she said. "I would have given a great deal not to have seen what I saw just now."

The rebuke sounded in the best of taste. Gordon bowed.

"I have a good excuse," he said, "in fact, the very best. As I told you some months ago, I have known Miss Lawrence for years. We have always understood one another, but because I was in no position to marry nothing has been said. Won't you be the first to congratulate me on my engagement?"

"Then fetch me an ice. By the time you return I shall have thought of something pretty to say. Ah, I have pricked my finger. The ice, my dear boy, the ice. The finger will not hurt till you return."

Her hand had shot out grasping for something to steady herself on—the whole world spun around her. She had given her whole passionate, tempestuous soul to this man; she had never dreamt that she could fail to gain his love. She had never failed before, she had only required to hold up her hand. . . .

She clasped the stem of a rose passionately. The cruel thorns cut into the soft white flesh, but

there was pleasure in the very pain. Another moment and she would have flashed out her secret and despair to the world. For the moment she was crushed and beaten to the earth. Yet she spoke very quietly and evenly, though the effort brought the blood thrilling to her temples.

She was alone now ; she could give vent to her passionate anger. She smashed her fan across her knee, she tore her long gloves into fragments. Dimly, in a mirror opposite, she saw her white ghastly face, and the stain of blood where she had caught her lips between her teeth.

"So I have to sit down and submit to that tamely," she murmured. "You little white-faced cat, you pink doll, so you are going to get the best of me. We shall see ; oh, yes, we shall see. If I could be somewhere where I could tear myself to pieces, where I could scream aloud and nobody could hear ! If I could only face him now and smile and say honeyed words ! To-morrow, perhaps, but not to-night. Even I have my limits. . . . He's coming back !"

One glance at the dim mirror and Leona Lalage flew down the corridor. The music of the band was like the sound of mocking demons in her ears. As she flew up the stairs she could see the blank windows of the Corner House staring dreadfully in. Then she locked the door behind her and flung herself headlong down on the bed. . . .

Only for a minute, a brief respite ; then she must go down to her guests again.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

HETTY darted up the secondary staircase intent only on her little charge. The child was unusually nervous and imaginative, as if she had been frightened by the ghost stories of a foolish nurse. Alternatively her mother's pet and encumbrance, Mamie had been driven back upon herself. And she had given up all the love of her heart to Hetty.

It was quite silent upstairs ; there was no sign of a maid anywhere. As Hetty reached the landing the frightened bleating cry broke out again. There was only a night-light in the nursery ; a little white figure sat moaning in bed.

"You poor little mite," Hetty said tenderly. "There, there. I shall stay here and not leave you any more until you go to sleep. Where is Richards ?"

"She said she wouldn't be a minute," Mamie sobbed. "I had one of my headaches and I couldn't go to sleep. Then I began to get frightened and I wanted somebody to talk to me. I could hear the people and the music downstairs, so I just got out of bed and went into the corridor."

"Ah, that is why your feet are so cold. Well ?"

"I stood in the corridor for some time," Mamie continued with her head on Hetty's shoulder. "The blinds were up and I could see those two wide windows in the Corner House. Richards' father was a footman there and she told me all about the poor dead lady and the dark husband who never said anything——"

"Richards shall tell you no more stories," Hetty murmured. "Go on, pet."

"And then I began to think about it and wonder. And when I was wondering and wondering and looking into those dark windows I saw a light."

"You saw a light? In one of those windows? Nonsense!"

"Dearest, it was not nonsense at all. The shadow of the light was all across my nightdress. I was so frightened that I could not call out because the Corner House is empty and it must have been a ghost. But that was not all."

"You fancied that you saw something besides the light?"

"I am certain," said Mamie with a resolute nod. "There was a face, a face looking out of the window. Oh, such a terrible face! It was dirty and grimy and one eye was all discoloured, and both the eyes were wild and fierce and hungry, just like that new tiger at the Zoo. Then the face went away and I screamed, and that's all, dearest, and oh, I am so dreadfully tired."

The little dark head fell back and the troubles were forgotten for the moment. The child was breathing regularly and peacefully now. More disturbed and uneasy than she cared to admit, Hetty crept out into the corridor. A certain amount of light from the house and the street fell on the blank

side of the Corner House. There were the two blank windows at one of which Mamie had seen the face. It must have been imagination, seeing that the Corner House had been deserted for years. Hetty knew its story as well as anybody else.

Was it possible that some crime or tragedy was being enacted behind those grimy walls, all unknown to the police? The house was reported to be luxuriously furnished, the front of the place was all shuttered. Stranger things are happening in this London of ours every day in the week.

She could certainly mention the matter to——. Hetty stopped suddenly and caught her breath. A faint light had commenced to glow in the Corner House, gradually the blank window shaped to a luminous outline. The light grew stronger and stronger, till Hetty could see the balustrade of the staircase. And then, surely enough there came a face to the window.

A dreadful face, a face dull and dissipated, with horrible watery red eyes, yet full of malice and cunning and passion. There was a bristle of whiskers and a moustache, as if chin and razor had for days been strangers. As suddenly as the face had come it turned. A hand shot out from somewhere, as if seeking for the throat of the strange apparition, a fist was uplifted, and the figure disappeared, evidently going down before a cruel and crushing blow. The light vanished; it had probably been overturned and gone out.

“Good heavens!” Hetty cried. “Did you see that?”

She was conscious that somebody was by her side. She looked and found that her companion was the Countess. No answer came. Hetty touched

the other's arm. She was shaking from head to foot like a reed in the gale.

"Did you see that?" Hetty demanded, again.

The woman by her side was slowly recovering herself. A minute later and she was her cold calm self again.

"I saw nothing," she said, between her teeth.

"And you saw nothing. It was some trick of the imagination. There is nobody in yonder house. When I took this place a year ago so that I could be near—what am I talking about? I have been working too hard at my pleasures lately; I shall have to take a rest."

"I am not suffering from any delusions," Hetty said, coldly.

"All the same, you will say nothing," Leona Lalage hissed. "What you have seen or what you imagine you have seen to-night is to remain a secret between us for all time. Do you understand me? There is no better friend than I in all the world, and there is no more dangerous enemy, See?"

She gripped the girl's arm with fearful force. A strong man would have had no more firm a clasp. Hetty winced under the pain, but no cry escaped her lips. There was some dark mystery here, some evil connexion between the desolation of the Corner House and the brilliant establishment in Lytton Avenue. Else why would Countess Lalage have been so far from the centre of the small world called Society?

"It is nothing to me," Hetty said coldly. "If you desire to avoid a scandal for the sake of the house, my lips are sealed. If you have nothing further to say to me, I will go and see if Mamie is still asleep."

## CHAPTER IV

### WEAVING THE NET

HETTY rubbed her eyes with the feeling that it had all been a dream. It was not yet very late, only a little after midnight, and the brilliant saloons were still crowded with guests. Down below in the dining-rooms people were supping, there was the dreamy music of a band somewhere. As if nothing in the world had happened Countess Lalage sat smiling brilliantly and chatting with not the least distinguished of her guests, Mr. Gilbert Lawrence, the famous novelist.

Hetty's uncle was evidently flattered. He liked talking of his own work, for his heart was in it, and he had for audience one of the most brilliant and beautiful women in London. His voice was something high pitched and it carried easily to Hetty's ears. Apparently, Bruce was gone, for the girl could see nothing of him anywhere. She was only too glad for a chance to sit down quietly and ponder over the disturbing events of the evening. Nobody was likely to be particularly interested in Leona Lalage's governess.

The little man with the keen restless eyes and the pince-nez did not suggest the popular idea of the novelist. He chattered on with frank egotism.

The world made much of him, and he took it for granted that all the world was interested in his work. And he was talking eagerly to Leona Lalage about the Corner House.

Hetty caught her breath eagerly. That dark and evil place seemed to have suddenly become part and parcel of her life. Instinctively she half hid herself behind a great dragon vase full of palms.

"Fact is I used to know the man who lived there," Gilbert Lawrence was saying in his quick staccato way. "And I was once in the house. No, I never met the wife. A depressing, gloomy house, like Tom Hood's haunted mansion. Just the place to plan a murder in, and never be found out. After the scandal I worked out a novel on the subject."

Leona Lalage's eyes gleamed like points of fire. They seemed to be burnt into her face. Hetty could see the restless play of the jewelled hands.

"Did you ever publish it?" she asked, eagerly.

"Never had the chance to write it," Lawrence cried. "But I worked it all out. Wicked woman, revenge, plot to bring hero within the grip of the law. It's pigeon-holed in my writing desk, and labelled 'The Corner House.' But I don't suppose it will ever be written."

"Worth stealing," a Society journalist lounging by remarked. "I could write a novel, only I can never think of a plot. Your old housekeeper is asleep long ago. Where do you carry your latch-key?"

"Ticket pocket of my overcoat," laughed Lawrence. "But you'll be found out, Stead. Being a critic, the public would never take you seriously."

The Countess's eyes flamed again suddenly. Hetty, watching, was utterly puzzled. What was



there in this trivial conversation that held this woman almost breathless? She had the air of one who has taken a great resolution. She seemed like a man face to face with death, who sees a way out.

A great many of the guests had by this time departed. It was growing very quiet in the streets now, the jingle of harness and the impatient pawing of horses had almost ceased. A soldierly-looking man came up to Leona Lalage, and held out his hand.

"But you are not going to Aldershot to-night. Captain Gifford?" Leona asked. "A cab? How extravagant!"

"Motor car," the stolid dragoon replied. "I've got a fifteen horse-power Daimler that I can knock seventy miles an hour out of at a pinch. And no danger of being picked up for scorching on a dark night like this."

The Countess put her hand to her throat as if she had found some trouble with her breathing. Those wonderful eyes of hers were gleaming like electric flashes. Her face was white, but her lips were drawn narrow with resolution. She rose, and sauntered carelessly to the door.

"I dote on motors," she said. "Nothing pleases me better than to go out in my own alone. I am coming to see your steed, Captain. The rooms are so hot here that I have a great mind to run away with it."

Gifford murmured something about the honour and pleasure. There was no vehicle to be seen in the dark street besides the gleaming mass of brass and steel that quietly simmered by the pavement.

"A beauty!" the Countess exclaimed, "And

the same action as my own. I believe I know as much about it as my chauffeur. Captain Gifford, let me try it alone, do. Harris, give me a coat. No, one of the gentlemen's overcoats—that grey one will do. Do let me go round the square alone!”

Gifford consented with outward urbanity. Few men could say no when Leona Lalage asked for a favour. With a man's coat over her gleaming black dress and ivory shoulders she sprang into the car, and the next moment she was flying round the corner. She laughed recklessly as she passed out of sight, a laugh with a ring of insolent triumph in it.

Ten minutes, twenty minutes passed, whilst Gifford fidgeted with a half-chewed cigarette in his teeth. Then there was a distant whirr, two flaming eyes and the gleam of brass and steel.

“An adventure!” the Countess cried gaily. “I have been dodging a couple of policemen, or I should have been back before. Beware of the high road. Good-bye, Captain, and if ever you wish to dispose of your Mercedes, give me the first offer.”

She passed up the steps with a face white but smiling, a queer lingering smile that boded ill to some one.

A few guests of the higher Bohemian type still lingered, but with easy tact the hostess contrived to get rid of them. Her absence had not been noticed, the little escapade on the motor was not mentioned.

The look of triumph faded from her eyes, she had grown worn and weary. The roses were wilting on the walls, the lights were mostly down now. Hetty, looking in to see if anything was wanted, found herself driven away almost fiercely.

"I am tired, weary, worn-out," the Countess cried. "I am sick of it all, sick of the world, and sick to death of myself. Go to bed."

The house was quiet at last, there was a passing cab or two, the heavy tramp of a policeman. Up in the nursery little Mamie was still sleeping, she was flushed and uneasy and murmuring as she slept. The recreant nurse lay on her back snoring loudly. Well, Hetty was a light sleeper, and her room was just opposite the nursery. Nurse would have slept through an earthquake.

Hetty returned to her room, but not to sleep. The vague shadow of some coming trouble lay upon her. She was young and healthy, and she was engaged to one of the best men on earth. And they were going to be married soon. She ought to have been superlatively happy.

Yet she was restless and uneasy. She had never known what it was to be nervous before. There was a dull booming noise somewhere, a knocking that seemed to proceed from the Corner House. Hetty heard something fall with a thud, she could have sworn to a stifled cry. A door opened and closed somewhere, there was a strong draught as if the basement had been opened. Hetty's heart was beating in some strange, unaccountable way. A little cry brought her to her feet.

But it was only Mamie whimpering and crying for her. The child was awake and sitting up in bed, whilst the nurse still slept. Mamie was hot and feverish.

"I am so sorry," she said, "but my throat is all parched up. Dearest, do please get me some soda-water."

"All right, darling," Hetty whispered. "Lie

down and be quiet, and I will see what I can do for you. I shan't be long."

There was everything that Hetty required in the dining-room. She crept softly down the marble staircase in her stockinged feet; down below in the hall a solitary point of flame in the electric corona made fitful shadows everywhere. There was one light also in the big, dark, dining-room, which was always left there, so that Hetty had no difficulty in finding a syphon of soda-water. She crept out into the hall again and paused.

Cigarette smoke. Smoke of a pungent acrid kind that might have been smoked in the house, but never beyond the kitchens. And it was fresh, too, for a trailing wreath of it hung heavy on the air. Without a doubt somebody was in the morning room.

Yes, Hetty could hear the chink of a glass, the fizz of something ærated. Her heart was beating painfully, but she was not afraid. Dimly, in a mirror opposite, she could see a hand reflected. But she could not see the face. The girl deflected the mirror slightly, so that the head and shoulders of the intruder were dimly focussed upon it.

A cry rose to her lips, but she stifled it. In a sudden, blind, unreasoning fear she fled noiselessly up the stairs. She had seen that man's features. It was the face of the man from the Corner House!

## CHAPTER V

### IN THE MORNING ROOM

THE house seemed suddenly to have developed into a place of horrors. Hetty had never been quite happy there. She had always distrusted and been a little afraid of Countess Lalage. There was something inscrutable about her face, a satanic suggestion behind her brilliant beauty.

There were little signs, too, that only a woman notices. It was as if the girl had found herself in a house of criminals. It was all wonderfully refined and luxurious, a perfectly appointed house, but after a year there Hetty knew absolutely nothing as to the past of her employer.

She flew up the stairs headlong with that blind unreasoning terror upon her. A big clock suddenly striking two went off in her ears like a rifle shot. She caught a glimpse of her own face in a mirror. Was that white scared visage her own sunny, happy face?

Without ceremony she darted into Countess Lalage's bedroom. The lights were still up, and the mistress of the house was brushing out her long black hair. She was cool and collected enough now

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"A man in the morning room," gasped Hetty. "A man with a horrid crooked nose and hands all over queer orange spots. Shall I alarm the house——"

"Come with me," Leona Lalage replied. "You are dreaming. Of course, there is no man in the house. Come along."

There was no sign of fear or dismay or anything else about the woman in white with the long black hair streaming over her shoulders. Yet she was annoyed, and her brains were working quickly. It was quiet in the corridor, save the little fretful whine from the child for something to drink.

"Ah, you have been down for Mamie," the Countess exclaimed. "She had one of her turns again. Give the poor child some of that soda-water and then follow me. Be quick."

Mamie drank greedily and thirstily. Then her head dropped and her eyes closed. With her heart still beating furiously, Hetty ran down the stairs. There was nobody in the morning room but Countess Lalage. She was smiling in a contemptuous manner.

"I have been in every room," she said. "There is positively nobody there. I shall have to send you away for a change of air. If you have no further dreams to tell me we had better go to bed."

Hetty had nothing to say. She was tired and worn out, and the cool contempt of her employer was galling. The Countess came into her bedroom presently; all her coldness had gone. She was the winning, gracious woman now as the world knew her. She had a little medicine glass in her hand.

"I am sorry I spoke harshly to you just now,

she said. "Drink this. It is my own pet mixture of sal volatile and a spirit of my own. It will act like a charm on those frayed nerves of yours."

Hetty drank the mixture gratefully. The few kind words were soothing. If there was anything really wrong the Countess could not have behaved like that. Her head touched the pillow, something delicious and warm seemed to float over her, and she was sound asleep.

Leona closed the door behind her with a snap. She was alert and vigorous as a general in action now. She passed downstairs swiftly but firmly, and into the morning-room. One by one she snapped up the electric lights till the whole room was bathed in a golden glow.

"Now, you scoundrel, come out," she cried.

The heavy curtains parted and the figure of a man emerged. He was short, yet powerfully made, with a curious twist from the hip as if he were deformed in some way. Ragged hair fringed his chin and lips. His long nose was crooked on one side; his equally long hands were covered with great orange freckles. An object of mistrust and suspicion everywhere.

The man's eyes were perhaps the worst part of him—dull, red, and bloated, full of a certain ferocious cowardliness. They were the eyes of a man who drank to excess. The red rims twitched.

"None of that with me," he growled. "Do you know who I am, Countess Lalage? I am Leon Lagage, Count of the Holy Roman Empire, and your husband. Incomparable woman, you cannot alter that fact. For better or worse, for richer or poorer, till death do us part!"

Death was near parting them now if the gleam

in Leona Lalage's eyes meant anything. She would have given half her splendour, years of her life, to see that man lying dead at her feet. If she could have slain him and safely disposed of his body she would have done so.

"How did you get here?" she asked curtly.  
"How did you find me out?"

The man laughed silently, horribly, his body twisting as if set on wires.

"Never mind that," he said hoarsely. "I did find you out, and here I am. Oh, it was a cunning plot of yours—so near and yet so far away. And as much brandy as I could drink so that I might drink myself to death, and after that perhaps a handsome monument testifying to my virtues. But I'm not going to stand it any more, I'm not going back there."

No reply for a moment, nothing but a quick heaving of the broad bosom, a livid play like summer lightning in the dark eyes. The man lighted a cigarette and puffed it noisily.

"I've got you, my lady," he said hoarsely.  
"Last time we parted you were not so comfortable as you are now, a *troisieme* and a few francs per day out of the cards when the police were *com-plaisant*. Here you have everything. There are a score of things that I could pawn for enough to keep me going for months. *Ma foi*, but you must be very rich."

"I have not £20 of ready money in the world."

"Give me *carte blanche* and I will put that right for you. I bear no malice. Reverse the positions and I shall do my best to put you out of the way. But I am not going back there any more."

"What do you propose to do, then?"



"Retire to the Continent. To-morrow you let me have £500 as a guarantee of good faith. Then I leave you—for the present. After that you can marry the young doctor who has won your affections and be happy—for, say a week."

Leona Lalage's white teeth came together with a click. It was good for the man that she had no weapon in her hand. It was hard work to keep down the tornado of passion that filled her. It seemed hard to imagine that she had once loved this man. Heavens! what a fool she once was.

"You know too much," she said quietly. "If that fool Giuseppe had done his duty you would have gone down to your drunkard's grave in ignorance. But you are not going on the Continent to-morrow or the next day. Fool, fool, have you not lived long enough to know that all that glitters is not gold! For the moment I am living on my reputation and the splendour of this house. Not one penny have I paid for it. People hold documents and title deeds of mine that are forgeries. I have a grand coup that may come off, and again it may fail. For the moment I am penniless."

The man nodded. The woman was speaking the truth, and he knew it.

"And in the meantime what do you propose to do?" she asked, swiftly.

"There is but one thing for it," the man responded. "There is ever before my eyes the fear of the police. Therefore I go back to my prison house till you are ready. But I have escaped once, and I shall escape again. Play me false, and I will come out and denounce you before a whole crowd of your painted butterflies. I could say to your medical Adonis——"

"Be silent," Leona Lalage hissed, "take heed lest you go too far. Begone, get back to your kennel, anywhere out of my sight. Do you think I want to keep you near me an hour longer than is necessary?"

He was gone at last; the hall door closed behind him. His footsteps echoed on the pavement a few yards and then stopped. After that the whole world seemed to be wrapped in silence. It was nearly dawn before Leona Lalage crept into bed. She carefully locked away some papers that she had almost committed to heart. There was triumph in her sleepy eyes.

"Freedom and revenge," she murmured. "What good words they are. To-morrow! Well, to-morrow shall be my destruction or my Waterloo!"

## CHAPTER VI

### A VISITOR

ON the whole, Gordon Bruce was persuaded that the world was a pleasant place to live in. He had youth and intellect and ambition that looked likely to be satisfied. Two years before he had recklessly ventured his small capital on a suite of ground floor rooms in Duke Street, and for some little time he had had a hard struggle to keep up appearances, and pay the instalments as they came due on his somewhat showy furniture.

But it had all come right in the end. He had had a little luck, but his great good fortune, or so it seemed, was when he had been called in to attend little Mamie Lalage. The Countess was just beginning to swim then upon the high tide of popularity. That the woman in her passionate, headstrong way had fallen in love with him Bruce never dreamt. It was only Hetty's woman's eyes and woman's instinct that had found the truth.

But the Countess was the fashion, and her doctor looked like being the fashion, too. A Duchess had taken him up ; she had firmly persuaded herself that Bruce had saved the life of one of her children. From a hundred or two, Bruce suddenly found his income expanded to as many thousands. No wonder that his dreams were pleasant as he lay

back smoking a cigarette after dinner. There was only one drawback—most of those two thousand pounds were on his books.

Well, his credit was good. If he could lay his hands upon a hundred or two now, he would begin to furnish the house in Green Street at once. Then when the season was over he and Hetty could be married. Yes, on the whole Gordon Bruce's cigarette just then was an enchanting one.

There was a ring at the hall and a servant came in. Gordon hoped that it was not a patient. He was dressed for a party, where he hoped to meet Hetty; not a grand affair, but a few friends in Gilbert Lawrence's luxurious chambers. Bruce looked at the card in his hand.

"I wonder who Herr Max Kronin is?" he muttered. "Ask the gentleman in."

He came, a mild-looking elderly German, heavy grey moustache, and eyes hidden behind a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles. He was slow of speech and gasped a great deal as if he had some trouble at his heart.

"You wished to speak to me," said Gordon. "Pray sit down."

The elderly stranger did so, and immediately the atmosphere was impregnated with an odour of strong tobacco.

"It is not as a patient I came," he said. "I take the liberty to occupy some of your valuable time. If you are in one hurry—"

"Not in the least," Bruce replied. "I have half an hour at your disposal. Your case——"

"Ach, but I have no case, I am not what you call a patient. It is another matter—a matter of sentiment."

Gordon bowed again ; evidently a lunatic of the harmless type.

"Some days ago you bought a picture," Herr Kronin proceeded. "It was a small picture of the early Dutch School, signed J. Halbin. A woman nursing a sick child, and the father looking on. Not a valuable picture."

"Certainly not," Bruce agreed. "I happen to know an expert who told me so. It took my fancy and I gave ten pounds for it, which, I understand, is about a tenth of its full value."

Herr Max Kronin nodded approvingly.

"That is so. Otherwise I should not be here to-night. As pictures go, £100 is not much. But that picture belonged to my mother's family—in fact, she is descended from the J. Halbin who painted it. It was sold some years ago at a time of great distress. We were sorry. Sentimental, you say, but it would be a bad world without sentiment. My sister, she never ceased to mourn over that picture. When the good time comes she try to get him back. But he has disappeared. Picture my delight when I see him in a little time ago in a shop window. I go home for my cheque-book—for I am not a poor man, Herr Bruce, now—and I hurry back to the shop. On my way I send a telegram to my sister to say the picture is found. When I reach the shop you have beaten me by ten minutes."

Herr Kronin paused, overcome by deep distress. His eyes behind the big glasses looked appealingly at Bruce.

"So you want to buy it from me," he suggested encouragingly.

"Oh, that is it, Herr Bruce, beyond doubt, that

is it. It will be easier for me, I shall not be so distressed, if you let me make a bargain with you. Herr Bruce, I will give you £200 for the picture."

Bruce hesitated for a moment. But why not? The man was wealthy, and the picture was worth half what he asked, perhaps more, for experts are not always correct. And £200 would mean the beginning of the furnishing of the new house. Dim visions of a happy honeymoon rose before him.

"Very well," he said. "You shall have the picture. It is there on the sideboard wrapped up as my expert friend returned it. Where shall I have the pleasure of sending it for you?"

"I will take him with me." Kronin said eagerly. "It will be good to feel that I have got him, that there will be no more cups slipped from ze lip. Sentiment again! But there is no sentiment about these banknotes, my friend."

He counted out forty £5 Bank of England notes on the table with a hand that trembled strangely. He seemed restless and eager to be away now, as if fearful that Bruce might change his mind. The whole thing might have been a dream save for the crisp crackling notes on the table.

"Never rains but it pours," Bruce smiled as he thrust the notes in his breast pocket. "To-morrow every penny goes for that wonderful lot of old furniture in Tottenham Court Road. What a pleasant surprise for Hetty!"

It required some strength of mind to keep the secret from the girl, but Bruce managed it. It seemed to him that Hetty looked a little white and drawn, but as the evening went on the happy look came back to her eyes again. There was a small

fernery at the back of the dining-room into which Gordon hurried Hetty presently.

"My dearest girl, what is the matter?" he asked.

It was good to be with him there, to feel the pressure of his hand, and to look into his keen, resolute face. With Gordon by her side Hetty felt equal to meeting any terrors. Yet after the lapse of a few hours the whole thing seemed so vague and intangible that she hesitated to speak.

"Is it the corner house again?" Bruce suggested playfully.

"Don't laugh, dear," Hetty whispered. "The place haunts me. I never seem to be able to get away from the horrors of it. And last night——"

"Go on, darling. I promise you not to laugh again."

By degrees Hetty told her story. It was real enough to her, but to Bruce's practical mind it sounded unsubstantial and shadowy. After all, she might easily have imagined the face at the window, and as to the man in the morning room, he had only been mistily reflected in a dim old mirror.

"But I should recognize him anywhere," Hetty protested.

Bruce thought that she would probably never have the chance, but he did not say so.

"Did Countess Lalage allude to it this morning?" he asked.

"Not a word," Hetty admitted. "She was glad to see me better; she breakfasted with Mamie and myself, and she was altogether charming, but——"

"But? There is much behind that word. You don't like her, Hetty?"

"I am afraid of her ; I mistrust her ; she frightens me. Call it prejudice if you like, but there is something wrong about that woman. Did she find out anything about us last night, Gordon ? "

"I had to tell her, of course," Gordon replied. "She accused me of flirting with you, and I had to speak for your sake."

"And what happened after that ? "

"Upon my word I forget. Oh, yes. She sent me at once for an ice, saying that she would think of something pretty by the time I returned. She must have forgotten all about it, for when I got back she had vanished."

It was Hetty's turn to hold her peace now. Leona Lalage had not felt equal to facing Gordon at that moment. Even her iron will and resolution were not quite equal to the strain.

"If I was only out of the house," she said. "If I was only out of that house."

Gordon bent and kissed the quivering lips. His little secret was on the tip of his tongue, but he repressed it.

"It will not be for long, dearest," he whispered. "Courage, darling."

If he had only told her ; if he had only spoken then !



## CHAPTER VII

### AT THE CORNER HOUSE

**B**RUCE walked home slowly and thoughtfully. The sound of a church clock striking the hour of one came vaguely to his ears. As a matter of fact he was more disturbed by Hetty's disclosures than he cared to admit. Hetty was not in the least given to hallucinations, and, after all, there was something mysterious about Countess Lalage. Still, she was so rich, and she was a favoured guest in some of the best houses.

Bruce put his latch key in the door and let himself in. As he did so a motor came up and pulled to the pavement. The whole concern was a dull black, like silk; it was absolutely the most noiseless machine Gordon Bruce had ever seen. It came like a ghost out of the darkness; like a black phantom it stood to command.

The driver was clad in goggles and leather coat, thereby proclaiming the fact that he was used to a high rate of speed. He placed a note in Bruce's hand; there was an interrogative gleam in his eyes.

"For me?" Bruce asked.

The man merely made a gesture with his hands. Then followed a sign, by which Bruce knew that

he was speaking to a dumb man, a startling affliction for a smart chauffeur.

Not that it mattered much, seeing that the letter was addressed to Bruce. The note inside was evidently dashed off in a violent hurry. It was an agitated request to the recipient to come in the motor at once ; there was no address, nothing more than this agitated plea. Under the circumstances there was nothing startling in the presence of the automobile.

Bruce started off, only staying long enough to get his professional black bag. He might have satisfied a little of his curiosity on the way, only his companion's affliction prevented that. He was on familiar ground presently as the car flew along smoothly as a boat sails down stream, until at length it pulled up with a jerk at the end of Lytton-avenue.

The car had stopped just before the corner house !

Evidently it was going to be a night of surprises. If Bruce had any astonishment he concealed it behind his professional manner. For the corner house was dark and deserted no longer. A brilliant light burnt in the hall. The door was opened presently by a woman who had a Spanish mantilla over her head. Her hair was down, and in the gleam of the lamplight Bruce could see that it was wonderfully long and fair and beautiful. Bruce spoke to her, but she only replied in what he deemed to be Spanish.

So far as he could see there were no signs of dust or desolation about the corner house. The hall was clean and bright, there was a thick carpet on the stairs. Every door was shut save one on the first floor, into which the fair beauty with the

lovely hair led the way. Four or five gas jets were flaring away with a hissing roar. A draught from somewhere made them flicker restlessly on a large room absolutely devoid of furniture save for an old-fashioned four-post bedstead in the middle. The air was close and stuffy, as if the window had not been opened for months. There were barred shutters before them.

The Spanish beauty said something, and pointed to the bed. A man in a deep sleep lay there—so deep a sleep that at first Bruce took him to be dead. But there was just the slightest flicker of a pulse, a quiver of the eyelids. On a table close by was a glass containing, from the odour of it, laudanum. A half-empty phial of it was clenched in the patient's hand.

A small, twisted man, with a nose all crooked on one side, and fingers covered with huge orange-coloured freckles! Bruce choked down a cry of amazement. It was indeed proving a night of surprises.

Here was the very man whom Hetty had seen at the window of the corner house—the very man whose features, as seen from the morning room, had been reflected in the mirror. It was impossible that there could be any coincidence here. Once seen the man could never be forgotten. It looked as if the new mystery of the corner house was going to be explained.

Just for a moment Bruce almost lost his self-possession. The beauty with the fair hair was regarding him curiously. He felt half annoyed that he had been so near betraying himself. The medical man was uppermost now. Evidently the patient was in a state of almost collapse from

alcoholic poisoning. As is usual in such instances, sleep had forsaken the wretched man, and he had had recourse to drugs. He had taken an overdose and medical aid had been summoned just in the nick of time.

The corner house, the mystery—everything was now forgotten. Bruce called for hot water, he made a sign for it, he simulated the mixing of mustard in a pot. Fortunately his companion's native intelligence was equal to the strain. She vanished with a quick nod of her head.

The house was wonderfully quiet ; not a sound came from anywhere. The repulsive figure of the man lay there like some new and hideous form of death. Who he was and why he came there Bruce did not dare to think for the present. Perhaps the dark owner of the house had returned ; perhaps this was the very man himself. Certainly there was no foul play here, no audacious criminal invasion of the house, seeing that the light in the hall could be seen from the street.

Surely they were a long time getting that hot water. In such a case as this hurry was everything. Bruce crept from the room and looked over the banisters. The whole place was in darkness !

Bruce caught his breath sharply. He had scarcely time to consider what it all meant when the light flared up again, and the fair woman returned with a kettle and basin and a tin of mustard.

The doctor slipped off his dress-coat and turned up his sleeves. In a prim sort of way his fair attendant took the coat away and hung it up carefully in the dim recesses of a big cupboard at the far side of the room. With great care and patience Bruce contrived to coax a quantity of the

hideous mixture of mustard and water down the unconscious man's throat.

For the next hour the struggle between life and death was a severe one. Once the strong emetic had done its work something like consciousness returned. The patient staggered backwards and forwards across the room on Bruce's arm until the latter was fagged and weary and the moisture dripped from his forehead. The first faint streaks of dawn were breaking as Bruce donned his coat and deemed it safe to proceed home. He made the woman with the golden hair understand that he would come again.

She shook her head and smiled as she held out three pounds and three shillings.

Evidently this kind of thing had happened before, and this was the fee usually paid. Bruce slipped the money in his pocket, feeling that he had earned it. The guide picked up a Bradshaw from the table and indicated Dover therein. Two strapped portmanteaus were on the floor.

The meaning of this was all plain enough. Bruce had had his fee and was dismissed because these strange people were leaving for the Continent at once, provided the patient was well enough to travel. Suddenly the hall light went out again, and once more the house was in darkness. There was the sound of a heavy footfall outside. Bruce put his back to the wall prepared for eventualities.

A scraping of a match, a flood of light again, a queer half-amused smile on the Spaniard's face, as she noted Bruce's expression. Then the front door was opened, and he was bowed out politely. Before he had time to cross the road the light was out again, and the whole house in darkness.

The cool morning air was grateful after the stuffy atmosphere of the corner house. Here was an adventure to think about and ponder over. Strange coincidence that he of all men should have been called there! It never occurred to Bruce that the thing could be anything but coincidence.

Should he keep the whole matter to himself, he wondered. At any rate he need not tell anybody but Hetty. Perhaps that drunken lunatic was some relation to the master of the corner house; he might have found his way into Lytton Square in a state of semi-insanity by favour of a careless servant. The thing was capable of a very practical solution.

Bruce put the thing out of his mind for the time being. The next morning was a busy one. When the back of it was broken he drove to Tottenham Court Road, where he managed to secure the old-fashioned furniture which had so taken his fancy. He felt pleased with his bargain, but as he repaired to the Lotus Club to lunch with Gilbert Lawrence nothing remained of the old Dutchman's bank-notes.

Lawrence was deep in the early edition of "The Star." He nodded to Bruce and looked up from his paper eagerly.

"By Jove, listen to this," he exclaimed. "Here's a strange thing for you. Some houses seem famed for tragedy, like some men are."

"Something in your line?" Bruce asked.

"Well, I should say so. Listen:

#### THE TRAGEDY OF THE CORNER HOUSE.

"The Corner House keeps up its reputation. A mysterious murder in Raven Street where an undiscovered crime happened years ago.

“ ‘At a little past twelve to-day a policeman on duty in Raven Street saw that the door of an unoccupied furnished house was open, and proceeded to investigate the premises. In a room upstairs he found the body of a man with his throat cut and a horrible wound at the back of his head. Robbery appears to be the motive. The matter is all the more mysterious as the place called the Corner House has been supposed to be shut up for years. It was here that the famous “Corner House” poisoning mystery took place.

“ ‘Later.—The murdered man is described as being of misshapen appearance, a nose very much hooked on one side, and long hands, covered with orange-coloured warts——’ ”

“What ? ” Bruce cried. “Read that over again.”

“Do you mean to say you know anything about it ? ” Lawrence asked.

“He was my patient,” Bruce said hoarsely. “I was with him at daybreak.”

Lawrence dropped “The Star” and gazed at the speaker with absolute amazement.

## CHAPTER VIII

PAUL PROUT

THERE was something about the corner house mystery that gripped the public imagination. There was about it both the realism and the romance that always go to make up a popular sensation.

In the first place, the corner house was already marked as the scene of one unsolved tragedy. For years it had been shut up, for years the boys of the locality had challenged one another to go down the area steps after dark, for years nobody had crossed the threshold. Then the door had been left open for the public eye to look on another tragedy.

The victim was no ordinary man either. People flocked to view the body as morbid folks will do on such occasions. The victim of the crime was no more attractive in death than he had been in life. There were the crooked limbs, the hideous hooked nose, the claws with the orange splashes on them.

But nobody identified the dead man; the police had not expected anything of the kind. The inquest had been formally opened at the corner house, and at the suggestion of Sergeant Prout, who



had the case in hand, was adjourned for a fortnight. It was hard to get the people out of the house afterwards.

They were gone out at last, and Sergeant Prout was left to make his investigations in peace. Up to now he had hardly as much as examined the body. An attempt had been made to find the owner of the house, or the agents, but without success.

"It's a queer thing," said Prout, scratching his snaky little head reflectively; "a very queer thing. Now here's a house for you. Given a man of energy and pluck who has learnt its story, and what is to prevent his taking possession and living here as if the place was his own? He comes and picks the lock, he has his servants in, and gives out that he is Jones or Robinson, and there's an end of it so long as he holds his head high and pays his creditors. Of course there is the risk of the real man turning up, but criminals must always take chances. In a way that's what happened. The poor fellow was lured here to be murdered by some one who pretended that the house was his. It's a very pretty case."

It was a puzzling one, too. Every policeman who had been on night duty in Lytton Avenue for months was closely examined. Once or twice a night the doors of the house had been tried without effect. Nobody had ever been seen to come away or enter. No suspicious characters had been seen loafing about. Not one of the officers had ever seen a light in the place.

"I'll go and look at the gas meter," said Prout.

He was an efficient officer in his way, only, like most members of the force, he lacked imagination.

Give him something to work on, and there was not a more efficient detective in New Scotland Yard. But there was no clue here, so he had to fall back on the old familiar methods.

Here was the gas meter under the stairs as usual. Behind it was the grimy, dirty card, which showed no entry for years. It was marked "taken 5 Feb.," in other words the meter had been read the day the owner had disappeared. By reading the index Prout saw that a hundred odd cubic feet of gas had been used since.

Here was something to go upon. Beyond doubt that gas had been used lately. Prout made a careful examination of the burners, sniffing and blowing at all of them. He found out one thing, only the burners in the hall and the bedroom where the murdered man had been found had been used for a long time. In a bedroom at the top of the house was a paraffin lamp with quite a new wick in it. With a stump of pencil Prout made a rapid calculation on the wall-paper.

"Lamp used by murderer waiting for his victim," he deduced. "Did not want any more light than was necessary, so probably lay low in a back room. When the hour for the victim came, lighted the hall gas so as not to look suspicious. Then why the dickens didn't the officer on duty notice it?"

"Because it wasn't there when he passed, Prout," said a quick voice that caused the detective to turn with a start. "There was a confederate, of course. Nothing easier than for the confederate to listen for the officer's footsteps and put out the gas till he had gone by. Other people didn't matter."

"Right as usual, Mr. Lawrence," said Prout, beaming approvingly on the great novelist. "Why don't you come and join the force?"

Lawrence modestly disclaimed the compliment. As a strong romantic writer he found a fascination in crimes of this kind; indeed, he boasted that practically all his living dramas were founded on life. He had a wonderful faculty for tracing the motive of a crime. Many a useful hint had he given to Scotland Yard.

"What's the theory here, sir?" Prout asked respectfully.

"A vulgar one," said Lawrence. "Robbery either from the person or indirectly. I don't see how anybody could possibly be jealous of a poor misshapen creature like that. We can put the Socialistic element out of the case. Have you found anything?"

Prout had found nothing. He had not had time yet to examine the deceased's coat and clothing. He was just about to do so. The first examination disclosed a pocket-book containing some score of more or less recent pawntickets made out in various names and a letter in an envelope.

"This looks like business," Prout exclaimed. "The letter is not sealed. Anyway, it was written here with the pen on the mantelpiece and that penny bottle of ink; see how pale it is and what shabby paper, evidently a ha'porth purchased from some huckster's shop. Isn't that right, sir?"

Prout scrawled in his pocket-book with the pen. The ink was just the same pallid hue. The pen was a "J," and the letter had evidently been written with a "J" too. Prout had every reason to be satisfied.

"What do you think of the letter, sir?" Prout asked.

There was no date and no address. There was a deal of flourish about the letter as if the writer had learned his craft abroad. It ran as follows:

DEAR FRIEND AND PARTNER,—At last the luck of the deuce has departed and my virtue has its own reward. I have found my man. At first my man blustered, but logic, *mon cher*, logic gets the best of temper always. I parted with him and he parted with £400. In sovereigns. Mark the cunning of the man! No notes or cheques for him. But money in cash I dare not send to you. Therefore I have changed my gold for notes, and £200 in forty lovely crisp bits of paper I forward herewith. They are numbered from 190753 to 190792. This I tell you for precaution's sake. I am waiting for the cipher from K and this I will enclose. Next Saturday I propose to salute you. Till then with my most distinguished admiration,

NUMBER ONE.

"What do you think of that?" Prout asked.

"Proves robbery," Lawrence said, crisply. "The murderer got away with the notes, but knew nothing of the letter. You go your way and I'll go mine. I am greatly mistaken if I don't throw a strong light on the mystery yet."

"You mean that you have a clue, sir."

"Certainly I do. This is a most amazing case. Why, it is copied from the plot of one of my own novels. And, stranger still, that novel has not yet been written!"

## CHAPTER IX

### THE MISSING NOTES

**I**T was late in the afternoon before Prout hit upon the trail he was looking for. He had been keeping the telegraph and the telephone busy. The scent was still hot, and it was just possible that he might come upon some trace of the missing notes before they left the country.

At any rate, it could only have been hours since they found their way into the hands of the murdered man. According to his letter, he had received £400 in gold—probably the result of some blackmailing transaction—after which he had hastened to turn them into banknotes for transmission, probably abroad.

Now there is only one place of business where a man can turn so large a sum of money into notes, and that place must be a bank. There are a great many banks in London, and the difficulty in finding the right one was enhanced by the fact that nobody besides Prout knew that there was anything wrong about these particular notes. On the face of it, the transaction was a very casual one,

It was nearly four o'clock before Prout raised the trail. On the previous day but one a cashier at the National Credit Bank had changed £400 in gold into notes for a stranger who answered to the description of the murdered man. Prout dashed down to Leadenhall Street in a fast hansom. The cashier was a little nervous, but quite willing to speak freely.

"I remember the transaction perfectly well," he said. "We do a lot of money-changing and that kind of thing, as our foreign connection is a large one. I should not have heeded the matter but for noticing the curious disfigurement of the man's hands."

"Covered all over with orange blotches, eh?" asked Prout.

"Quite so. The man was all twisted from his hip, and he had a crooked nose."

"You needn't say any more," Prout said crisply. "That's the man. You changed the gold for the victim of the Corner House tragedy. Got the numbers?"

The numbers were forthcoming, of course—190753 to 190832, the first half of which eighty £5 notes had been alluded to in the murdered man's letter.

"So far so good," Prout remarked. "It's not a very pleasant experience, but I am sorry I have not finished yet. I shall have to trouble you to come as far as Raven Street with me and identify the body."

It was well over at length, but the mild little cashier had nothing to say except that he really must go over to the Raven's Arms and have a little brandy. Abstemious man as he was, he felt it was necessary. Presently the blood came back

to his face again, and his dilated pupils contracted.

"That's the man, sergeant," he said. "And I hope I have seen the last of him. Are you going to advertise those notes?"

Prout replied for the present he had no intention of doing anything of the kind. The thief knew nothing about the letter, or he assuredly would have destroyed it. He would imagine that he had got off scot free with his booty, and thus might walk into the trap prepared for him.

"We shall lie low for the present," Prout said. "And I will ask you to do the same. You may mention this matter to your manager, but not to another soul. I'll try and get down before five and see your manager myself."

It was not a bad day's work, and it spurred on Prout to fresh endeavours. He carefully examined the fireplace, he tested the windows, but nothing rewarded his endeavours beyond a blacklead-brush thrown into the corner of the scullery together with a cake of blacklead recently opened.

"Now where does this come in?" he asked himself. "There isn't a grate in the house that has been touched for years. And this cake is not quite dry yet. And a bit of yellow soap in the tray over the sink that would be as hard as a chip if it had been here since the people left. But it hasn't. Murderer may have washed his hands, which is exceedingly likely, but what did he want blacklead for?"

Prout looked keenly around him. He opened the back door into a yard that gave on to a lane at the back of the house. The bricks were damp and mossy, and on them was something that looked like the print of wheels. The door leading to the

lane was wide, and on the edge on both sides something patchy glistened. Prout touched it with his fingers.

"Now what does it mean?" he asked himself. "What game were they playing?"

The black edging of the gate-posts was fresh blacklead.

The little discovery gave a new twist to Prout's thoughts as he drove down to the National Credit Bank. He had no particular object save to see the manager and impress upon him that in the interests of justice the whole thing must be kept a profound secret. There was no difficulty about that: the cashier was indignant, for he had already given his promise on the matter.

"Not that you will ever see those notes again, sir," Prout said. "By this time they are probably on their way to the Continent, whence they may begin to dribble back one by one in the course of months. Still, one never can tell.

The manager was sympathetic; at the same time he looked at the clock, which was drawing very near to closing time. There was a lull outside in the traffic. Prout took up his hat and prepared to depart.

But the same moment his friend, the cashier, came rushing in. His eyes were gleaming behind his spectacles.

"A most extraordinary thing, sir," he stammered. "Those notes that Sergeant Prout came about just now are——"

"Get on," the manager said impatiently, "Get on."

"Have been paid in to the credit of a customer, or part of them."



“Numbers?” Prout snapped. “Which part of them?”

“190753 to 190792,” the cashier replied.

“Every note,” Prout cried, “every blessed note mentioned in the dead’s man’s letter.”

## CHAPTER X

### A POLICY OF SILENCE

GILBERT LAWRENCE lighted a cigarette and waited for Bruce to speak. It wanted some little time to luncheon. The doctor's statement was likely to add piquancy to the meal.

"Well, one hears some queer things," the novelist said at length. "I've been fascinated with that corner house for years. As I told you before, I built up a romance round it. Some day I mean to take the papers out of my pigeonhole and work it up."

"Did you ever put me in it?" Bruce asked gravely.

"Well, upon my word, I fancy it was something like it," said Lawrence. "There was a hero like yourself, only he wasn't a doctor, and a girl like Hetty. Also there was a mysterious assignation in the corner house after midnight, and, as a matter of course, a body. None of these stories are complete without a body."

Bruce chafed under the flippancy. He was quite undecided what to do. Beyond all question the patient whom he had attended under such mysterious circumstances was the murdered man.

Was it his duty at once to go to the police and tell them all he knew? On the other hand he had no desire to violate professional confidence. Certainly the lovely Spaniard and the people of the house could have nothing to do with the murder. If they had, they would never have called in a doctor's aid and paid him a handsome fee to save the life of that poor dissipated wretch. It must have happened after they had gone.

"Tell us all about it," Lawrence asked eagerly.

Bruce related his story without going into details. Rarely had a raconteur a more flattering audience. Most men would have laughed the whole thing to scorn. But the novelist knows the vast possibilities of life, and Lawrence paid his companion the compliment of believing every word that he said.

"Upon my word, a most remarkable thing," he exclaimed.

"You have said that before," Bruce replied irritably. "What I am thinking about at present is my own awkward position. Shall I go to the police and tell them everything or shall I respect confidence?"

"Pursue a policy of masterly inactivity," Lawrence suggested after a thoughtful pause. "Say nothing for the present. The matter has not been brought before you officially yet. There will be an inquest, which will only last a few minutes, for the simple reason that the police will ask for an adjournment. Meanwhile I will go and have a chat with the man who has the case in hand. If the time comes when you must speak, why speak, of course."

Bruce fell in with this suggestion, and sat down to lunch with what appetite he could. He was terribly disturbed and uneasy. He was dining that night with Countess Lalage, who was giving one of her brilliant little parties. There would be a chance of a cosy little chat with Hetty afterwards, but all the same as Bruce dressed he wished that he was not going.

Even the great beauty and the refinement of his surroundings failed to soothe him this evening. Usually this kind of thing pleased him. He noticed vaguely that the Countess was dressed in some cloudy lace, all like sea foam, and that the dark eyes were unusually brilliant and glittering.

There was a score of guests in the drawing-room, all laughing and chatting together. Hetty was there also, looking, to Bruce's eyes, the sweetest and prettiest of them all. She owed nothing to artificial beauty.

"I owe you a deep apology," the Countess whispered, as she held Bruce's hand. "I was exceedingly rude to you the other night. I ought to have waited for your ice, and more especially, I ought to have waited to congratulate you. I am very glad for Hetty's sake. She is a good girl, and I shall miss her."

The voice ran true and clear; there was deep sincerity in the eyes of the speaker. Bruce was melting, despite himself. Hetty must be wrong. A brilliant woman like that would never throw herself at the feet of a mere doctor. Nobody could look in her eyes and doubt her goodness and truth.

"It is very good of you to say so," Bruce murmured feebly.

The Countess pushed him from her with a merry smile.

"You are distant to-night," she said. "Go and talk to Hetty. Not that I am going to let her monopolise you all the evening. I am too jealous of your reputation for that. Now go and make the most of your time.

Hetty looked up shyly. There was a faint little smile on her face. She wore a single stone diamond heart on her breast. But for this Bruce would not have known how quickly she was breathing.

"What is it?" he asked. "What is the matter, sweetheart?"

Hetty smiled up into her lover's face. From under her long lashes she could see that Leona Lalage was regarding her intently.

"Talk in an ordinary manner," she whispered; "say anything foolish—the sort of bald nonsense young men chatter in drawing-rooms. And don't forget that the Countess is watching every gesture intently."

"She struck me as being rather nice," Bruce replied. "And I am quite sure that she was sincere in her congratulations."

Hetty said nothing further on that head. The Countess was a wonderful actress. She would have deceived the strongest, coolest head in the world. But even that magnificent actress could not blind a woman's instinct.

"Perhaps," Hetty said, after a long pause. "Perhaps. And yet something tells me that you are in great danger. Smile and say something foolish—I feel those eyes going through me. That woman loved you, and you never gave her a thought.

You passed her by for me. And who would look at me when she was about ? ”

“ I would for one,” Bruce laughed. “ I am not fond of your tempestuous woman. Have there been any other signs and manifestations ? ”

“ Don’t laugh at me, Gordon,” Hetty whispered. “ I knew there was something wrong with that dreadful corner house. You have heard of the tragedy ? ”

Bruce nodded. He would keep his secret for the present even from Hetty. In any case this was not the place to discuss the great adventure.

“ Well, I fancy I can tell you more about it,” Hetty went on. “ Only you must not look so interested. Try and assume the idiotic expression of a lover on the stage. Last night I could not sleep. I have been terribly restless lately. I got up to fetch a book from the schoolroom, which is in the front at the top of the house. The blind was up, the window was not closed, so I looked out. The air was so cool that it did my head good. I was there about a quarter of an hour. I heard the noise of a door being closed and whispers on the pavement. Those people had come out of the corner house, two of them—a man and a woman.”

“ What time would that be ? ” Bruce asked as casually as possible.

“ About half-past-four. It must have been about that time, because just after I got back to my room the clock struck five. A motor car came up, one of the quietest I have ever heard. As the woman got in she stumbled, and the man swore at her. Then there was the strangest thing, the dull side

of the motor car gleamed in places like silver, as if something had been rubbed off it by the woman as she fell. What do I think it was? Well, so far as I could make out, the car was all hung with black crape."

## CHAPTER XI

### THE NOTES ARE TRACED

THE best part of two days had passed, but there was no abatement in the sensation caused by the fresh tragedy of the corner house. An enterprising newspaper had made a determined effort to trace the whereabouts of the real owner of the premises and drag his pitiful story afresh into the daylight, but he was not to be found. No relative came forward with the hope of gain. And it looked as if the new tragedy was going to be as deep a mystery as the old one.

Of course the police knew nothing. Sarcastic remarks were made at their expense. Other papers hinted at startling disclosures to be made at the adjourned inquest. There were many startling rumours contradicted as soon as they were made.

"Even you are puzzled, uncle," Hetty said to Lawrence. She was off for the afternoon; she had called at the novelist's chambers to meet Bruce there with an eye to a little shopping and a visit to the new house in Green Street. "I know you are interested. Can't you make anything out of it?"

"Well, I can and I can't," Lawrence said thoughtfully. "I'm puzzled, of course, and I



am very much interested in this kind of thing. But really I am puzzled over one of the most remarkable coincidences that ever happened in the experience of a man who has made a pretty penny out of coincidences. In this instance 'the long arm' has taken a form that is positively uncanny."

"Perhaps I can help you," Hetty suggested.

"So you shall later on," Lawrence replied. "For the present I have my hands full. 'I've had some hard problems to solve in the way of plots, but never one like this. Here's Bruce coming along the street. Run away and leave me to my puzzle.'"

Hetty determined to think no more about it for the present. It was a lovely afternoon, she was conscious of the fact that her dress suited her to perfection, and was she not going to spend a long afternoon with the man of her choice in the fascinating occupation of house furnishing?

It was the first half-day Bruce had taken off for a long time. All his patients this morning had behaved in a perfectly satisfactory manner. The sun was shining out of a cloudless sky, everything seemed fair and prosperous. It was one of the days when everything seems well—the kind of day that often precedes disaster.

Hetty chatted along by the side of her lover happy enough. She would have made light of the fears had they occurred to her now. After all, what could the Countess do? That love and revenge business was all very well in books. Gordon was a resolute man, perfectly capable of taking care of himself, and the Countess was not likely to do anything to prejudice her position in society.

Thus Hetty out of doors and in the sunshine. She and Bruce had a thousand plans to make, a score of shops to look into. Their tastes were the same, and principally lay in the direction of the old and antique.

"We won't bother about the drawing-room," Hetty said gaily. "That can take care of itself for the present. Two fans and a bulrush as somebody says. And the other rooms, so long as they are light, won't matter. But the dining-room must be quite the thing. Oh, if you could only afford to get the lovely oak we saw at Capper's! We must think of you alone, just at first, Gordon."

She looked up with such a sunny smile that Bruce regretted the presence of others. There was not a happier pair in London. They turned into Capper's presently, and for the first time that day Hetty was conscious of a little pang of envy.

"I am not going to look at another thing," she said. "But it does seem hard that we have not got another hundred pounds, Gordon."

Bruce kissed her behind the demure corner of a Japanese screen. His eyes were dancing with mischief and pleasure.

"You can spend the hundred pounds as you please, dearest," he said. "I am going to tell you a secret. I have had a lovely slice of luck. Forty five-pound banknotes that I never for one moment expected came my way."

"Then you can buy the old oak," Hetty said rapturously.

"Always thinking of others," Gordon smiled. "To tell you the truth I have bought and paid

for the old oak. Consequently the money set aside for that goes to your side of the house. No, I have no choice in the matter. I am going to let you do exactly as you please."

The sedate head of the firm in personal attendance smiled. The lovers were not sorry to be rid of him when he was called away for a moment. An official-looking person was standing by the desk with a package in his hand.

"These banknotes were paid to your firm?" he asked.

Mr. Capper admitted the fact as he glanced at them. They had been paid to him two days ago and by him passed on to a wholesale firm of upholsterers.

"In fact," he said, "the customer who gave them me is now in the shop."

The official-looking man stepped forward. As he came into the light Bruce recognised him for Sergeant Prout. A sense of uneasiness came over him. Prout touched his cap and then indicated the notes.

"A word with you, Dr. Bruce," he said. "These notes, 190753 to 190792, were in the possession of the man found murdered at the corner house in Raven Street. We know they were stolen from him. The next day they were paid here in purchase of some furniture."

"Some mistake," said Bruce. "I certainly paid forty five-pound notes here the day after the murder, but they came into my possession the night before. If those are the notes you say they are I never touched them."

Prout turned the notes over and opened them out like a pack of cards.

"Is not that your signature endorsed on every one?" he asked.

"Good heavens," Bruce cried hoarsely, "it is. It would be futile to deny it."

## CHAPTER XII

### PROUT IS PUZZLED

HETTY moved instinctively to her lover's side. His face was ghastly pale, but he held his head high and looked Prout proudly in the eyes. The latter waited. He had made no accusation; it was not his cue to express an opinion one way or another. Hetty looked at him approvingly.

"If there is anything wrong about the notes," Capper began, "I can only——"

"From your point of view there is nothing wrong," said Prout. "A mere coincidence, sir. If I could only have a few minutes' private conversation with you, doctor?"

Bruce led the way outside. He was utterly bewildered. Those notes had passed into his possession quite honestly, they were for value received, and they never left his possession until he parted with them to Capper. Why, they were in his possession hours before he was called into the corner house.

The strangely assorted trio turned into a tea-room close by. They had a table to themselves where they could talk freely.

"Now say it all over again," Bruce asked. "I am perfectly dazed. Let me know what I am accused of doing."

Prout replied that for the present there was no accusation.

"It's like this," he said, laying the fateful notes on the table. "A man who has got to be identified is found dead—murdered, beyond a doubt, in an unoccupied house in Raven Street. All the circumstances of the case point to robbery. On searching the body we find a letter written by the deceased to a friend saying that he is forwarding some banknotes. He gives the number of those banknotes amongst others—numbers 190753 to 190793. All this is set out clearly in the letter. Now, will you please to examine those notes, doctor, and tell me the numbers?"

Bruce turned them over one by one. There was no mistake about the matter at all. They were the same numbers as those given in the handwriting of the dead man. The whole thing seemed impossible, but there it was.

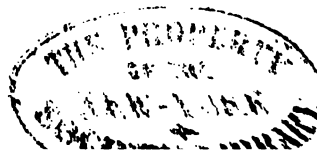
"One moment," Hetty asked eagerly. "How do you know that the letter in your possession really was written by the murdered man?"

Prout glanced admiringly into the pretty flushed face.

"That's a clever question, miss," he said, "but I have a reply to it. We have found a woman near the docks where the unknown stayed for a day or two. As she cannot read or write she got him to write her a line or two to her landlord's agent, sending some arrears of rent and promising the balance shortly. That scrap of paper has come into my possession."

"And of course it tallies," Bruce said moodily. "Those things always do."

"It does, sir," Prout went on. "The question



of handwriting is established. How those notes came into your possession we have yet to find out."

"They never came into my possession," Bruce cried. "There is some mistake——"

Prout tapped the pile of papers significantly.

"Here they are, with your signature on the back of every one of them," he said. "There is nothing singular about that, seeing that so many tradesmen insist upon having banknotes endorsed. Question is, What's the explanation?"

For the life of him Bruce could not say. It was absurd to suppose that by some mistake the Bank of England had issued two sets of notes of the same series of numbers. There was no mistake about the murdered man's letter either.

"Perhaps you'd like to tell your story, sir," Prout suggested.

"My story is quite simple," Bruce replied. "Some little time ago I bought a picture by J. Halbin. I gave a few pounds for it. Early in the evening of the day preceding the corner house murder I had a visitor. He was an elderly Dutchman, who gave his name as Max Kronin. He had heard of my purchase, and wanted the picture for family reasons. He offered me £200 for it, and paid me in notes—the notes that are on the table there."

"Which identical notes must have been in the possession of the murdered man for many hours after you say they passed into your possession."

"Take it or leave it," Bruce said desperately. "It's like some horrid nightmare. From the time I received the notes from the elderly Dutchman till I parted with them to Capper they were never out of my possession."

"Of course, you know where the Dutchman is to be found?"

Bruce shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"He took the picture away," he said, "and I thought no more of the matter, he said something about going to Antwerp. In the face of the damning evidence you have piled up against me, my story sounds hysterical and foolish."

Prout was not so sure of that. He had seen too many startling developments in his time to be surprised at anything.

"Of course, it wants a bit of explaining away," he said. "Still, supposing for argument sake you were the thief, how could we possibly connect you with the corner house and the poor fellow who was murdered there?"

It had come at last. Bruce braced himself for the ordeal. Just for the moment there was a terrible temptation to hold his tongue. The story of his visit to the corner house was known to those only who would not dare to speak. Once he told the truth he realized that he was putting a noose around his neck.

And yet as an honourable man he was bound to speak, indeed he had already spoken, for Gilbert Lawrence had been made privy to part of the story.

"You couldn't prove it," he said, moodily, "but I can, I must. Prout, I am the sport of either a most amazing piece of misfortune or else the victim of the most cunning and diabolical scheme that man ever dreamed of. I was actually in the corner house within an hour or so of the murder."

A queer little cry broke from Hetty. Her face was deadly pale, her eyes dilated with horror. It



was only for a moment, then she slipped her hand into that of her lover and pressed it warmly. Even Prout seemed uneasy.

"You are not bound to say anything further, sir," he muttered meaningly.

"Ah, I know what you mean," Bruce went on recklessly. "Don't you see that as an honest man I am bound to speak out? Just as I reached my rooms that night a motor drove up to my house with a note for me——"

"Ah! I should like to have a look at that note," said Prout.

"I destroyed it. There was no object in keeping it. I tore it up then and there and pitched it on the pavement. The motor was driven by a dumb man, who conveyed me to the corner house. It struck me as strange, but then the owner might have returned. When I got there I found the man subsequently murdered suffering from a combination of alcoholic poisoning and laudanum. It was hard work, but I managed to save him. A Spanish woman—the only creature besides my patient I saw—paid me a fee of three guineas, and there ends the matter."

Prout's expression was that of a man who by no means shared this opinion, but he said nothing on that head.

"Did you speak to the Spanish woman?" he asked.

"I couldn't, for the simple reason that she knew no English," said Bruce. "I know I am putting a terrible weapon in your hands but I have no alternative. If there is anything else that I can tell you——"

Prout rose and bowed to Hetty.

"It's not fair, sir," he said. "It's giving me too great an advantage. If you take my advice, you'll go at once and explain the position to some smart solicitor—Ely Place for choice."

## CHAPTER XIII

### SECOND SIGHT

HETTY clung to Bruce's arm as if fearful for her safety. Of course, he was absolutely innocent, but how far the world would believe it was quite another matter. For the girl was quick and clear-sighted, and it needed no explanation to show her Bruce's terrible position.

Her nimble wit pointed to conspiracy.

But it was only a vague idea at present. She forced a brave smile to her lips.

"We won't discuss it, dearest," she said. "The mere idea of your guilt is absurd to any one who knows you. I cannot realize it yet, the whole thing is so terribly mixed up and involved. The one man to get to the bottom of things is Gilbert Lawrence. The police will see nothing here beyond a mere vulgar crime. My uncle Gilbert will bring a novelist's imagination to work on it, And, whatever happens, there will be one person who believes implicitly in you."

Bruce pressed the little hand under his arm silently. He did not feel equal to speaking just for the moment. Despite the pain and trouble at her heart Hetty spoke bravely. She forced a smile to her face. Bruce felt that he had never loved

the girl by his side so much as he did at that moment.

Lawrence was fortunately at home. He had just finished a story, so that his frame of mind was complaisant. But as he listened to the dramatic events of the afternoon he grew deeply interested.

"We thought you would help us," Hetty said.

"I am probably the only man in the world who can help you," Lawrence replied. "To a certain extent I seem to have got you into this mess, and I must get you out of it. My dear young people, I am going to astonish you presently. Now, all I know up to now is that these notes have been traced to Bruce, and that, by a dreadful coincidence, he actually was one of the last people to see the murdered man before the tragedy. His little part Bruce has already told me, but I purposely asked no details. He has not yet informed me how the notes really reached his pocket, because the assumption that he stole them is ridiculous."

"Thank you for that," Bruce said gratefully.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow. Now let me open your eyes. Behold the great force of a man who is gifted with second sight. Where did you get those notes? Was it not on the same evening as the murder?"

Bruce nodded. He was beginning to have some feeling of hope.

"Score one to me. Recently you bought some article of value. Say it was a piece of Battersea china or a Chippendale chair, an engraving after Reynolds, or a picture. On the whole I am inclined to suggest a picture of the Dutch school with a history."

Lawrence's eyes fairly beamed as he spoke.

"Another one to you," said Bruce. "I did buy an old Dutch picture recently. But how on earth you managed——"

"Never mind that yet. I didn't get this information from you. Behold the picture! You are sitting in your room on the night previous to the murder—a few hours before it in fact. Enter to you a more or less picturesque individual who tells you a story of a picture. It is an heirloom in his family. The family have had to part with it in their dark days. Now the same picturesque individual has become rich. Imagine his delight when he sees this family treasure in a shop window."

"Amazing," Bruce cried. "That is exactly what did happen. But how could you possibly have known that considering that until an hour ago not a soul knew of it, not even Hetty!"

Lawrence puffed his cigarette in huge enjoyment.

"So far the oracle has spoken correctly," he went on. "The picture was in the shop window. The old man had no cheque book. He hurried home to get it, and by the time he returned the picture was gone. There's a pathetic little incident for you, quite in the fashion of a lady's novelette. The picturesque old man wants the picture and he offers you £200 for it, which you accept. He pays you in bank notes and you place these notes in your inner coat pocket."

"I shall wake up presently and find it a dream," said Bruce. "If you had been present at the interview you could not have described it better."

"End of the first act," Lawrence said with pardonable triumph. "You are just going into your rooms when a motor comes up. It looks like a

coincidence, but the driver has been lurking about waiting for you. Do you suppose it was chance that you were picked out of all the doctors in London ? ”

“ I thought, perhaps,” Bruce began, “ that my name——,”

“ Fiddlesticks ! You are the victim of a vile conspiracy, my dear fellow, if ever there was one. Now let me go on with my visions. The motor is an unusually silent one, and it was painted a dull, lustreless black.”

“ Correct to a fault,” Bruce cried.

“ Well, we shall hear more of that lustreless black motor later on when I come to go closely into the mystery and show the police what asses they are. You address a question to the driver and he turns out to be dumb. He takes you to the corner house, where you are received by a fair woman with a mantilla over her head so that you have the very vaguest idea of her features. If you were asked to swear to her identity you couldn't do it I suppose ? ”

“ At the present moment I could not swear to my own,” Bruce said helplessly.

“ Well, you can leave other people to do that. You find your patient half dead between drink and drugs, and after a time you pull him round. As you go away you sign to the Spanish woman that you are coming again. She says no, and by means of a Bradshaw and some labelled luggage—say to Dover—leads you to believe that the people of the house are going abroad at once.”

“ Marvellous ! ” Bruce cried. “ It is exactly as you have said.”

“ Of course it is,” Lawrence replied. “ One

question more. How many times did the hall gas go out when you were there ? ”

Bruce looked at the speaker absolutely too astounded to say a word.

## CHAPTER XIV

### "CROWNER'S QUEST"

HETTY was conscious of a sea of curious eyes and white, eager faces. As the days went on public interest in the corner house mystery had not abated. All sorts of vague stories had got about, and in some mysterious way the name of Dr. Gordon Bruce was mixed up in it.

Why he had not been arrested Bruce could not imagine. The tale he had volunteered to Prout and his signature on the back of the notes were almost in themselves enough to hang a man. Perhaps a little private conversation between Prout and Lawrence had had the effect of postponing matters. Bruce was not in the least likely to run away; on the contrary, he had volunteered to give evidence at the adjourned inquest. Hetty also would have something to say that would be in favour of her lover.

"After all, they can't definitely say that those notes were ever in the possession of the murdered man," she whispered to Bruce. "He wrote the letter, of course, but they don't know he really possessed the notes."

"I am afraid they do," Bruce replied. "They are going to call a cashier from the National Credit



Bank who positively identified the deceased as the man who changed £400 in gold for notes, part of which notes were numbers 190753 to 190792, or the notes I paid to Capper. That piece of evidence cannot possibly be shaken."

Hetty admitted the fact with a sigh. She had no illusions as to the future. Unless something like a miracle happened Gordon was certain to stand in the dock charged with the murder of a man unknown. Examined in the cold light of day, Gordon Bruce's story was an extraordinary one. Hetty was forced to admit that from the lips of a stranger she would not have believed a word of it.

And Gilbert Lawrence now refused to say anything. He was the one person who seemed to be thoroughly satisfied. There was some comfort to be derived from this, but not much, as Hetty told herself miserably.

The inquest was sensational from the very start. After the dead man's landlady of the house by the docks and her landlord's agent proved the handwriting of the deceased, Sergeant Prout told the story of the missing banknotes. A good few of the packed audience knew Bruce by sight, and as the evidence proceeded he found the scrutiny of so many eyes quite trying.

Even the most guilty when brought to book are not without some feeling of shame, however defiant they may appear, but it is a horrible thing when the innocent has to stand and answer to a criminal charge. A wave of indignation passed over Bruce, to be followed by utter helplessness.

"Courage, dear old boy," Hetty whispered. "It will all come right in the end. Good will come out of this evil."

Bruce shut his teeth tightly and nodded. Still, in Prout’s evidence he seemed to hear the voice of his judge passing sentence.

Prout concluded his evidence at length, every word of which told dead against the one man seated there. Not half a dozen people in the room would have acquitted him on the criminal charge.

“Do you propose to go any further to-day?” the coroner asked.

Prout was understood to say no, when Bruce rose. His face was deadly pale, a tiny red spot burning on either cheek. But he had his voice under proper control; there was no look of guilt about him.

“If you have no objection, sir, I should like to give evidence,” he said.

The presiding official was decidedly taken aback. He looked at Prout, who made no sign. He was not so prejudiced as most of the people there.

“Really if you will be guided by my opinion you will do nothing of the kind,” he said, much as a magistrate might address a prisoner in the dock. “If you were called it would be a different matter. On the whole the best plan would be for you to be represented by a solicitor, who would put questions likely to—er—tell in your favour.”

Bruce smiled grimly. He knew perfectly well what a terrible significance lay behind these formal words. At the same time, he had no desire to take any advantage. There was an electric thrill in the audience as he was sworn. They thrilled with a deeper intensity as he proceeded. If ever a man stood up and committed moral and social suicide Dr. Gordon Bruce was that man at this moment.

There was scarcely a sound to be heard till he had finished. People thrust forward, eager that no word should be missed. A sudden sneeze caused the whole court to start violently. It was a strange weird story, that only one listener believed in, and that was Hetty.

The coroner had nothing to say. The thing was bad enough, and he did not wish to be too hard on a medical colleague. A curious jurymen had a lot of questions to ask, especially about the mysterious Spanish woman and the motor car.

"You left that lady behind you?" he said. "Who is to testify to that? If you can prove such to be the case, why——"

The curious one shrugged his shoulders. Then a loud clear voice rang to the roof, the voice of a woman who declared that she could prove it. A ripple of amazement followed. Before it died away Hetty became conscious of the fact that the voice was hers, and that she had spoken.

In a dreary kind of way she found herself answering questions. Somebody had placed a book in her hands and had told her to kiss it.

"I live next door to the corner house," she said. "I could not sleep on the night in question. At a little before five——"

"How do you fix the time?" came from the inquisitive jurymen.

"Because my bedroom clock struck the hour as I got back. I heard somebody leave the corner house. I looked out of the window and saw a motor car that appeared to be draped in black. As a woman from the house got on to it she seemed to push some of the drapery aside, for I saw the gleam of the rail. She was a fair woman with a

mantilla over her head. The car went off without the faintest noise, and that is all I know."

"Are you a friend of the prison—, I mean of Dr. Bruce?" asked the inquisitive one.

Hetty was bound to admit that she was more than that. The interrogative jurymen sniffed and suggested that Dr. Bruce might have been in the house then.

"Impossible," Bruce cried. "At a quarter to five I was at home. The hall porter and two of the maids were down and will testify to the fact."

A ripple of excitement followed. A reporter rose and held up his hand.

"I desire to be sworn, sir," he said. "It so happens that I can throw a little light on this matter. I did not leave the office of my paper till four in the morning of the day to which this young lady alludes. The clock on Gregory's store struck five as I reached Garrett Street, which, as you know, runs into Raven Street. A few seconds later a fast motor passed me without the slightest noise."

"Perhaps you had better describe this motor," said the coroner.

"It was draped or some way disguised in black. A woman sat by the driver, with a cloud of lace over her head. I could just catch a glimpse of a brass rail where the drapery was disturbed."

Prout snapped his note-book together and put it in his pocket.

"After that," he muttered, "I give it up; it's beyond me."

## CHAPTER XV

### LAWRENCE PROPHECIES AGAIN

THE puzzled and slightly dissatisfied audience poured out of the inquest hall with a feeling that they had been defrauded. There was no chance of a verdict of murder against Bruce after the last two bits of startling and quite unexpected evidence. Two credible witnesses had proved that one of the people who had called Bruce to the corner house had remained after he had left. The case was just as fascinating, and at the same time as puzzling as ever. The real culprit as yet might have to be found, but there was no getting away from these facts about the stolen banknotes. Still, the coroner's jury were not called to try that question, and at the suggestion of Prout the matter was adjourned for a month.

Bruce was allowed to take his own way, a result he had not confidently expected. The vulgar curiosity of the passing crowd annoyed him. Standing outside the vestry hall was a carriage and a pair of horses. Leona Lalage, seated inside, smiled brilliantly on Bruce and his companion, and the footman opened the door.

"I managed to get inside," the Countess said. "Did anybody ever hear so foolish a fuss? And that silly juryman!"

"I am afraid I should have shared his opinion under similar circumstances," said Bruce. "You see my guilt——"

"I shall not listen to a word of it," the Countess cried. "The mere suggestion is revolting to one's common sense. Fancy you committing a vulgar crime like that! Jump in, and let us get away from this awful crowd. Where shall I drive you?"

It was all the same to Hetty so long as she got away from the insolent people. They must go back and have tea at Lytton Avenue. There would be nobody present, and the Countess would not be at home to anybody. Nothing could be sweeter or more sympathetic than her manner.

To lounge there in that dimly-lighted and perfectly appointed room was soothing and restful. Bruce carried his head a little higher as he made his way home.

There was a smell of tobacco in his room and a vision of Lawrence with his heels on the mantelpiece smoking a cigarette. He was looking at a paragraph in an early edition of the *Globe* that seemed to give him satisfaction.

"So you've got back," he said. "Rather a sensational bit of copy for the papers over the inquest, eh? That pompous juryman's face was a study when Hetty and that reporter chap knocked him out of time."

"I didn't see you," said Bruce.

"All the same I was there all the time. I fetched the Countess Lalage in. As I entered I bought a copy of the *Globe*. The first thing that took my eye was the very strange advertisement inside by the theatrical notices."

Bruce glanced carelessly at the paragraph. Then his eye brightened. It ran as follows :

“ Danger.—The danger lies in the second floor back bedroom of the corner house.—Z.”

“ Toujours the corner house,” Bruce cried. “ What do you make of it ? ”

Lawrence looked at his friend with a twinkle.

“ I’ll tell you my opinion later on,” he said. “ I think that after an exhibition of my marvellous powers, you can safely leave the matter to me. Should you like to have a little bit of an adventure this evening ? ”

Bruce replied that he was just in the frame of mind for something of the kind. He was far too restless to settle down to anything.

“ It may be lively and it may be the reverse,” said Lawrence, “ but it is nothing more or less than an hour or two spent in the corner house. We are going there after ten, and I prophesy that we shall catch something ; if we are very lucky it may be the being with the secret.”

“ In other words you propose to drag my unlucky self into house-breaking ? ”

“ Nothing of the kind. I have procured the key to the back part of the premises from Prout, who has the profoundest respect for my sagacity. When I pointed out that notice in the *Globe* to him he proposed to have the house watched, which is so like a policeman’s intellect.”

It was a little past ten when the two friends set out upon their errand. There was nothing of note until the house was reached. The blinds were all closely drawn, so that the adventurers had to grope their way from room to room, the suggestion of a light being out of the question.

"We'll sit in the hall," said Lawrence. "We'll take it for granted that the owner is a hospitable man, and permit ourselves the luxury of tobacco."

It was a long and weary vigil, and when the clock struck midnight Bruce heartily wished himself out of it. It was a strain on the nerves, too, sitting in that dark silent house waiting for something that might not come. Lawrence did not usually display any bulldog qualities, but he sat on grimly now.

The traffic grew quieter, only a solitary pedestrian or a tramping policeman passed the house. Then came a firm footstep that paused before the house, with a suggestion of listening or waiting for someone on the part of the wayfarer.

Bruce's heart beat a little faster as he heard a scuffling on the step and the muffled rattle of a latch-key in the door. There was a breath of welcome fresh air in the stuffy place, the impact of two bodies, and Lawrence rushed upon the newcomer. There was a muttered curse and a fall.

"Got him," Lawrence cried. "I knew we should. Or he's got me. Light the gas, Gordon; we'll have to risk it this time."

Bruce fumbled for the bracket, and found it at length. There was a flaring rush and then dazed eyes made out a tall man with a pair of blazing angry dark eyes, and a beard quivering with rage.

"Come my man, what's your name?" Lawrence panted.

"My name, sir," said the other coolly and clearly, "is Mr. Garrett Charlton, the owner of this house. And who are you?"



## CHAPTER XVI

### MR. CHARLTON SPEAKS

**F**OR once in his life Lawrence was utterly taken aback. He could do no more than stammer out an apology and assure the stern dark-eyed stranger that nothing in the way of a liberty was intended.

"You see, I have found something out," he said. "I rather hoped—indeed, I have still hopes—that the culprit——"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Charlton asked impatiently.

"But, surely, my dear sir, the tragedy that took place here so recently——"

"So recently! Ah, this is a veritable house of tragedies. I must get you to explain. I have come here direct from Paris to get certain papers. Put the gas out and come into the dining-room where the shutters are up. We don't want the police fussing about. You can tell me everything. If I don't make a mistake you are Mr. Gilbert Lawrence, the novelist."

"And I remember you now," Lawrence replied. "So you know nothing of what has been happening lately?"

The story was told at length, Charlton listening

with a certain amount of interest. He looked like a man under the cloud of a great sorrow, the contemplation of which was never far from his eyes.

"This is an accursed house," he said presently. "My father went mad here and committed suicide. My wife did the same thing, but then she was the victim of one of the greatest fiends that ever took mortal guise."

Mr. Charlton's melancholy eyes seemed to be fixed on space. Just for the moment he had forgotten that he was not alone. Lawrence gave a sympathetic cough. As a matter of fact, he had not yet explained what he was doing there, and the longer the explanation was postponed the better he would be pleased.

"You remember the case of my wife?" Charlton asked suddenly. "Ah, I see you do. Well, I am going to tell you my story. You are a man of sentiment and feeling, or your novels greatly belie you. And a doctor always respects confidence. When my wife died there was an inquiry extending over many days. The great question was: Had she poisoned herself, did she take poison by misadventure, or did I kill her? Nine people out of every ten believed I was guilty. I let them believe it at the risk of my neck, and why?"

The speaker asked the question quite fiercely.

"Because you loved your wife and respected her memory," said Lawrence.

"Correct. You are a man after my own heart, sir. My wife committed suicide because she thought I no longer loved her, and that I had transferred my affections to the woman who acted as her companion.

"That woman was perhaps the most beautiful creature I have ever seen. We never dreamt the depth of her wickedness, that she was a gambler and a forger. But she was. And when the gaol loomed before her she took my wife's jewels to sell and so save herself from exposure.

"But she never got those jewels out of the house. She was found out by a piece of good luck—whether good or bad luck I shall leave you to guess. She had barely time to throw the gems down the well which is in the little courtyard behind the house, and my wife saw it all. The woman was informed that on my return from a journey I should be told everything. She knew that investigation would follow. And what did that fiend of a woman do. She forged a letter from me in which I made the most violent love to her and asked her to fly with me. Mind you, that letter was posted and delivered here. It was very easy to contrive that it should find its way into the hands of my poor wife; it was safe to reckon upon her emotional temperament. She read the letter; she took from a drawer a phial of some sleeping draught, and she poisoned herself."

Charlton paused and wiped his forehead. He spoke quite calmly and collectedly, but the great drops stood on his face.

"I got home sooner than expected, got home in time to find my wife dead and that fatal letter in her hand. The woman who was the cause of all the mischief entered the room just too late to get the letter back. She was off her guard for the instant, and I saw it all in a flash. The part about the jewels I got later from one of the servants who had been afraid to speak before.

"I said nothing—for my dear wife's sake I was silent. You see I could prove nothing. No jury would have got anything out of the fiend who brought this about. The letter I carefully concealed. I took the risk of hanging, and as people blamed me my wife's good name was saved."

"I am afraid I don't follow your reasoning," Bruce said.

"I do," Lawrence observed. "At the time it was quite natural. But it seemed a pity to let that woman get off scot free."

A queer, hard smile came over Charlton's face.

"Nemesis is slow but sure," he said. "My turn will come. That letter is locked up in the safe yonder. Would you like to see it and compare it with my own ordinary handwriting? Oh, that was a wonderful woman!"

Charlton proceeded to open a safe in the wall and took from it two letters.

"There," he exclaimed. "That is the letter, the other sheet is my own handwriting. Did you ever see a more marvellous imitation? There are times when I feel as if I really must have written the letter myself. Look at it, Mr. Lawrence."

Lawrence had pounced upon it eagerly. His lithe little frame was thrilling with excitement. He held his head back as if sniffing at some pungent odour.

"Here's a discovery," he said, excitedly. "Here's a perfect revelation. Mr. Charlton, will you trust me for four and twenty hours with this letter? I've found out something that fairly takes my breath away."

"As you please," Charlton said, indifferently.

"All discoveries are the same to me now. But why do you smell that letter?"

"I'm on the scent," Lawrence laughed. "All the same, if I am correct it will be no laughing matter for somebody before long."

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE GAMBLERS

THE lights were flaring at No. 1 Lytton Avenue, as they seemed to flare almost day and night. The red carpet crossed the pavement ; inside the banks of flowers nodded their brilliant heads, there was a rustle of silken drapery and a ripple of laughter from the drawing-room. It was all typical of a life of pleasure.

In one corner was an oblong table, surrounded by an eager, silent group. A bald-headed man with a matted black beard and a great curved nose was taking the place of banker. The great financier Isaac Isidore was as keen over the banknotes here as he was over the millions he gambled in the city.

No servants were present, they had been sent away long ago. Tempting things were set out on a side table, and whoever wanted anything helped himself. The players were so intent upon their game that nothing could be heard beyond their laboured breathing.

They were gambling in earnest, there were hundreds of pounds in notes and gold on the dull green cloth. A handsome youth, who was ruining himself and his estate as speedily as possible, sat easy and collected next to a young society lady, whose

husband would have been shot rather than see her in such company. A pretty marchioness, the daughter of an American millionaire, was plunging greedily and losing as steadily. Countess Lalage smiled with perfect equanimity as she saw her own counters vanishing. She pushed over two small notes with a little sigh. She did not look as if they were the last she had in the world, but they were.

The whole brilliant house of cards must topple down soon unless help came from somewhere. Already capitalists in the city were asking questions about the securities they held, the hearts of certain tradesmen were beginning to grow anxious.

"Lend me £500, Lady Longmere," the Countess asked gaily.

"Not a cent," Lady Longmere cried in a high nasal voice. "I guess my luck's just in, and I'm going to make the most of it. I'm £8,000 to the bad, and once I make that up you don't catch me at this game again. If Longmere knew that I had broken my word like this he would kill me."

"Who'll lend me a few hundreds?" Leona Lalage cried with a red spot on her cheeks.

Nobody replied. They were all under her own roof, they had all enjoyed her hospitality times out of mind, but not one of them was prepared to lend her money. And Leona had had a fearful run of luck lately. Out of all those dainty smiling friends of hers seated round that table there was not one who did not hold her I.O.U. for considerable sums of money. She was beginning to be talked about. That very morning in the Park a well-known society leader had ignored her until recognition was forced upon her by sheer audacity.

"No one to help me at all?" she pleaded. Her

voice was low, but she shook with passion. The big financier growled out that he would trust her to £50. In two minutes this was gone, and the banker made no further sign.

She must go on, it was absolutely necessary. Audacity would carry her far, but even she had need of ready money. And luck must turn now, if she had a hundred or two she was certain of it. It was madness, to sit there, and watch that golden stream change hands and not share it. She could have risen up and smitten her guests, and turned them furiously out of the house, but she had to sit there and smile. The gambler's fever was upon her, and there was dire necessity for some ready money on the morrow. She rose from the table with a sudden resolution. As she turned, she saw Lawrence looking critically round him.

"You don't play," she said. "What interest is there to you?"

"It is a fine study in human nature," Lawrence replied. "All the evil emotions are here nicely chained up. I like to watch and study for myself. Let me sit down and smoke a cigarette and study."

Leona Lalage flew up into her own room. She was going to do a desperate thing. She had always recognised the fact that at some time or other it might be necessary to disappear suddenly and mysteriously from the brilliant field, and that is not possible even to the cleverest without money. Desperately needy as she had been more than once lately, she had never broken into the little reserve that she kept for emergencies.

"Our hostess has gone to rob a bank," the gentlemanly youth suggested.

"Or to pawn her jewels," Lady Longmere laughed.



"Isidore, why didn't you offer to lend her money on her tiara?"

"Because it is probably paste," the banker said, coolly. "Hein, I have seen enough of society women to know something of the value of their gems."

The spiteful little ripple of laughter was hushed as Leona Lalage returned. There was a flush on her face and a glitter in her eyes that Lawrence did not fail to notice. A little sheaf of banknotes fluttered in her hands.

"Give me gold for these," she cried. "Gold, red gold, two hundred sovereigns. Now, we will see whether fortune is still going to spite me."

For an hour they played on steadily with varying fortune. The clocks were striking two as three of the party dropped out, having lost everything. A great pile of gold stood before Leona Lalage, a large pile of notes opposite Lady Longmere. There were only five in the game now, and the banker was losing in a manner that caused the beads to stand out on his bald head. He shovelled out the last of his notes and his remaining gold and shook his head.

"I have gone to my limit," he said. "Gordon, give me a brandy and soda. Would you like to take my place, Lady Longmere?"

The American beauty shook her head and smiled.

"Not I!" she said. "I've got all my season's losings back, and I've done with this kind of thing, right here. I'm very fond of Longmere in my funny way, and I'm not going to deceive him any more. But I shall be afraid to go home with all these notes on me."

"I'll take them off your hands and give you a

cheque," said Isidore. "I shall want a lot of notes in the morning."

He scribbled out a cheque, and then, with the custom of his class, went through the whole pile of notes down to the last one. There was a puzzled frown on his face.

"Are they bad?" Lady Longmere asked quizzically?

"It isn't that," said Isidore. "I've got a fine head for figures, and some of the numbers of these notes strike me as familiar. They are identified in my mind with some sensation or tragedy. It seems to me—ah! got it!"

"What is it now you have got?" Leona asked.

"Why, the corner house," Isidore cried. "Forty of these notes form part of the money taken from the body of that poor murdered fellow in the corner house. Here they are—190793 to 190832. Now which of you was it who came here to-night with these particular notes in your pocket?"

The gamblers looked at one another uneasily, but not one word was said.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### LAWRENCE IS MYSTERIOUS

**D**ESPITE his vast wealth and the manner in which he was courted and flattered by society, Mr. Isaac Isidore had contrived to remain single. He had only one passion, and that was the making of money by ingenious schemes ; in fact, had he not been a capitalist he would have made a wonderfully good novelist, as Lawrence often said. Mystery and intrigue were the very air he breathed, and for recreation he asked for nothing better than a romance by Gaboriau or Du Bois-gobey.

He was breakfasting rather later, but quite modestly, in his chambers when Lawrence called on him the next morning. There were a good many points in common between the two men despite their different dispositions.

"Funny thing over those notes last night," said the man of money. "I suppose that is what you came to talk to me about."

"What a luminous mind yours is," Lawrence replied. "That's just why I did come. As you know, I am deeply interested in clearing up the Corner House mystery. I've got nearer to it than

anybody imagines. Do you happen to have any idea who came with those particular notes last night ? ”

“ Not the ghost of one,” Isidore admitted. “ I can read men and minds, but motives are sometimes beyond an amateur like me. Do you know ? ”

“ Yes,” said Lawrence, “ I do.”

“ Which means that you are not going to tell me ? ”

“ Not for the present, my boy. Without boasting, I do know, but I could not prove it yet ; at least, not to the legal mind. Have you got those notes ? ”

Isidore intimated that they were in his safe. He took out the whole roll, and asked Lawrence to sort out the particular ones for himself.

“ I only want one,” Lawrence explained, “ and this one will do admirably. I am going to take it away, if you don’t mind. You will be able to recognise it by this queer yellow stain. Why didn’t you decline to take them last night ? ”

“ Why should I ? ” Isidore asked coolly. “ They came to me through a third party for value received, so that they are quite good. When these notes are presented the bank is bound to cash them. I’d give sixpence to know what is behind that queer, clever, ingenious brain of yours.”

Lawrence laughed and departed with the assurance that Isidore should know soon enough. He spent the rest of the morning at the club, and after luncheon took his way gaily in the direction of Lytton Avenue.

The Countess was at home, and glad to see her visitor. The back drawing-room was cool and secluded and opened on to the garden. Leona

Lalage lounged back in a deep chair and indicated the cigarettes on a table.

"I have told Saunders not to admit any more visitors," she said. "Positively I shall break down if I don't get a rest soon. Does Mamie make too much noise for you! If so, call to Miss Lawrence."

Mamie and Hetty were playing together in the garden. The child was shouting merrily. Fond of children, Lawrence disclaimed any feeling of annoyance.

"Children and dogs never bore me," he said. "I wish I had a garden like yours. Pleasant perfumes always stimulate the imagination. Did you ever notice how the smell of certain flowers recalls vivid recollections?"

A sudden pallor came over the listener's face, it was gone in an instant, and a deep carmine flush succeeded it.

"Sometimes horrible recollections," she said in a low voice. "A certain flower you love gets mixed up with a tragedy, and you never care for it afterwards."

"Of course, I've noticed that," said Lawrence thoughtfully. "For instance, I once was exceedingly fond of the smell of tuberose, but——"

A little ornament fell from the table by Countess Lalage's side and a cry escaped her. Lawrence looked up in mild surprise.

"Nothing the matter, I hope?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing," came the reply. "Only I was so silly as to place the wrong end of my cigarette in my mouth and burnt my lips. What's tuberose?"

Lawrence gave the necessary information. He was a little surprised to hear that his hostess had

never heard of the tuberose. Nor, fond of flowers as she seemed, did she appear in the least interested. "That child's noise makes my head ache," she said.

Lawrence stepped into the garden, Mamie welcomed him eagerly. No books of hers were half so popular as the novelist's impromptu stories.

"Tell me a tale," she demanded, imperiously.

Lawrence complied with resignation. It was all about a beautiful bad woman who guarded a precious treasure locked away in a box covered with paintings of exquisite flowers. Mamie clapped her hands with delight.

"Like mother's Antoinette cabinet in the drawing-room," she said.

"That's it," Lawrence said gravely, but with a glance at Hetty that caused her to flush a little. "And the key is like this one. We'll give it to Hetty, and some time when the wicked woman is out of the way she may get the tiny little phial that is in the cabinet so that we can do all kinds of wonderful things with it."

"Perhaps we could get it now." Hetty smiled.

Mamie clapped her hands again. A significant look passed between the two conspirators. A small key changed hands. Before the story proper was finished Countess Lalage came down the steps into the garden. Admiration was necessary to her, and the idea of a man's preferring Mamie's conversation to hers was absurd.

"How you spoil that child," she said. "Hetty, take her away."

But Lawrence would not hear of anything of the kind. He would like to have his tea out in the garden if Hetty would fetch it for him. Hetty

came back presently, and handed the tea to her uncle. He hardly dared to look at her, but a smile on her lips told him she had succeeded. As he left the house presently Hetty followed him out. She nodded significantly.

"What does it all mean?" she asked.

"That you shall know all in good time," Lawrence replied. "It's a pleasure to have you to do anything for one, Hetty. How quickly you took in my parable. It was rather paltry to talk over a child's head like that, but if ever there was a case when the end justifies the means this is one. Of course, you got it?"

"Of course I did. A tiny glass bottle with a tiny glass stopper."

She took it from her pocket and held it out. There were a few drops of amber-hued liquid inside. Hetty would have removed the stopper, but Lawrence grabbed it.

"Don't touch it," he exclaimed, "keep as far from it as possible. There is real danger here if you only knew it. And whatever you do, don't you go near a soul in the house till you have washed your hands with Sanitas or some pungent disinfectant of that kind. You must be very careful about this."

Hetty promised, wondering.

"Where did you get that key from?" she asked.

"Well, I borrowed the original and had a copy made," Lawrence confessed. "You see I was bound to have a copy, as I am going to return the little bottle as soon as I have more or less verified its history. Now I want you to get away after dinner and come as far as my chambers to meet Bruce."

Hetty promised, and went her way homeward. She was sorely puzzled, but on the whole she felt wonderfully bright and happy. The mystery was still as dark as ever, but she had faith in Lawrence. But there was much to be done before one good man's name was cleared.



## CHAPTER XIX

### STOLEN !

NOT till now did Gordon Bruce fully appreciate the blow that a cruel fate had dealt him. At first he had been confused and bewildered, and a little disposed to doubt the evidence of his senses. There was a vague hope that it was a trick, a mistake that a moment would rectify.

He had not been arrested yet ; his own voluntary evidence, backed up so strangely by the evidence of Hetty and the reporter, had staved that off for the present. But really, things were almost as bad. He had his own friends, of course, who were prepared to back him up through thick and thin, but there were others who passed him with a cold bow, or cut him altogether. He had called at one or two houses professionally, where he had been informed that his services would no longer be required. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Bruce met it bravely. Even Hetty did not quite guess what he was suffering.

He was only too glad of any excuse to meet her now. Anything to get away from himself and his own disturbed thoughts. And he had not so very much faith in Lawrence, despite the latter's pretty gift of prophecy. The artistic temperament is always a sanguine one.

Hetty was waiting for him now in Lawrence's study. She looked bright and cheerful so that Bruce kissed her passionately. It would be hard if he could not live up to her courage and devotion.

"My poor boy," she whispered. "My poor boy! But it is not going to last. The truth is bound to come out before long. And then it will be like one of those queer bank panics—only weather the storm, and you will be more sought after than ever."

Bruce forced a smile to his lips.

"If you can be brave so can I," he said. "And perhaps Lawrence will bring off one of his wonderful problems. But one thing I am pretty sure of—it has nothing to do with your employer, Countess Lalage."

Lawrence came in puffing one of his eternal cigarettes. His manner was full of confidence.

"I wanted to have a chat with you two people," he said. "In the first place I have made a startling discovery. Of course you know that the victim of the Corner House tragedy changed £400 for notes at the National Credit Bank. We know that somehow or other half those notes found their way into the possession of our friend Bruce here. Now, did it not strike you as strange that nobody should worry about the other half?"

"Perhaps already disposed of elsewhere?" Hetty suggested.

"Perhaps. Or the poor fellow might have had them in his pocket with the list. But the notes were there, and, as a matter of fact, I have quite recently had them all in my hands."

Bruce's listless manner departed. His respect for Lawrence began to revive again.

"When did you see them?" he asked. "Did Prout——"

"Prout! That estimable man is not likely to help much in a complicated case like this. As a matter of fact I saw those notes in Isaac Isidore's chambers this morning, they had been paid to him in a certain fashionable house where they were gambling heavily last night. Can you guess where the house is?"

Bruce shook his head. Hetty shook her finger at him disapprovingly.

"How slow you are," she said. "Where does anything happen that touches on this case? And I know where there was some heavy gambling going on last night. The incident took place in the drawing-room of No. 1, Lytton Avenue."

"Is that really a fact?" Bruce cried.

"Honestly," said Lawrence; "I was there and saw it. Isidore has a perfect figure memory, and spotted those numbers at once. But unfortunately it was impossible to identify the person who introduced the notes into the room, as there were so many of those bits of paper on the table. But I shall find out. I know what the enemy's next move will be."

"Do enlighten us a little," Hetty pleaded.

"Well, I will. From the very first the mystery has developed exactly on the lines laid down in that sketelon story I told you of. My locale was the corner house, and the plot started there. Did I not forecast all about the Spaniard and the lights going out and everything. It is easy when you know how it is done. Therefore I was quite prepared for the next move."

"But nobody has seen this plot," said Hetty.

"My dear girl, what I have just told you proves the contrary. Much as I owe to coincidence, I am not going to swallow that. Now I have not so much as taken the trouble to look at that synopsis which was pigeon-holed in my desk a long time ago. It would be useless to look for it."

"And why?" asked Bruce.

"Because I feel quite sure it isn't there," said Lawrence. "Now take my keys, Hetty. I am pretty methodical, as you know; I always know exactly where to put my hand on everything. Unlock the panel on the left-hand side. Tell me what you can see in the pigeon-hole to the right."

Hetty unlocked the desk and searched as desired.

"There is nothing whatever in that pigeon-hole," she said.

"As I expected," cried Lawrence. "Stolen! There's a pretty piece of valuable information for you. The person who stole that is at the bottom of the crime. In other words, the key to the future movements of the criminal is in my hands!"

## CHAPTER XX

“UNEASY LIES THE HEAD——”

THE rose-tinted silken blinds were drawn in the boudoir, the house in Lytton Avenue was hushed, there was a smell of eau-de-cologne on the perfumed air. Society deeply regretted to hear that Countess Lalage was suffering from nervous prostration. Leona Lalage lay there pressing her hands to her head fiercely. It was only latterly that she had suffered from these nerve troubles. Hitherto she had regarded herself as absolutely invincible to anything of the kind.

A queer sort of fainting fit had been followed by a ghastly sense of fear. Intrigue had hitherto been the very air that this woman breathed. Now she was frightened, every ring of the bell sent her heart into her mouth.

She was horribly frightened. If she could only have seen her antagonist it would have been bearable. But she was fighting shadows. Whichever way she turned she found herself checkmated and beaten.

Somebody had found her out. It must be so, because all her plans were anticipated by the terrible antagonist who worked in the dark. Her case was much like that of a despairing criminal

who takes one huge sum to conceal the loss of another until the inevitable crash comes.

"If my brain gives way now," she muttered, "if my reason plays me false now even for a day I—but I dare not think of it. Well, what do you want?"

A liveried servant looking into the darkened room murmured that Dr. Bruce had arrived. Bruce came in with his softest professional manner. He was sorry to hear that anything was wrong, he asked a great many pertinent questions.

"You have overdone yourself," he said with his cool hand on the fevered pulse. "Few men could stand the strain of your present life. You must go away at once to some very quiet place and be in the open air all day——"

Leona Lalage laughed aloud. The touch of those cool fingers thrilled her. To go away now, to abandon it all just when——. Ah, the thing was impossible. She might just as well have cast herself off Waterloo Bridge.

"Excuse me," she gasped, "I am a little mad to-day. My dear boy, I cannot go away, the thing is impossible. If you could only look into my heart—but nobody can do that. Oh, Gordon, Gordon!"

Her voice sank to a thrilling whisper. Bruce touched her hand soothingly. The mere contact of his fingers seemed to madden her.

"Don't do that," she said, in the same strained whisper. "If you only knew how I cared for you, how I love you. There is nothing I would not do for you! I am rich and powerful, and men who know say I am beautiful. Take me away, make me your wife, and you shall never know a moment's

pain. Your good name is gone, Gordon—but what does that matter. If——”

She paused as Gordon recoiled from her. His eyes were full of loathing.

“Forget this,” he said, sternly. “Put it from your mind, as I shall do. It is a passing madness. My future wife would blush if she could hear you.”

The woman’s eyes dilated, her bosom heaved. She might have been waking as from a trance. She was fighting passionately for the mastery of herself. It was a short, sharp fight, but it left her trembling from head to foot.

“Forget it,” she said, hoarsely. “I—I never meant a word of it. Leave me now. Send me something to soothe these frayed nerves of mine. Only leave me alone.”

The door closed quietly behind Bruce. Just for a moment the lace-clad figure lay motionless on the couch. Then she rose and swept up and down the room like a tornado. She had shown her hand, she had betrayed her secret, and the man who had her heart scorned her. She was filled with shame and rage and hate.

“I began to be sorry,” she murmured. “My remorse spoilt my rest; I thought that all the world would turn from him, and that he would come to me, and then—Well, the dream is dispelled, for he will never come to me now. They say that a woman who loves at forty is capable of every madness. I was mad just now. And now there is but one thing to live for, I will live for that; ah, yes, I will live for that!”

She sat down quietly for a moment with her hands locked together. That indomitable will was acting on the racked body. She crept upstairs

before dinner white and shaky ; she came down shimmering in white, and diamonds in her magnificent hair and corsage, smiling, brilliant, as if she had the whole world at her feet. Hetty looked at her with dazed admiration.

"That dreadful headache has gone," the Countess cried. "I am myself again. We will dine quietly together, you and I, and go to hear Melba presently. Come, you can leave Mamie for just one night."

Leona Lalage swept into her box later on with the air of one who feels that she is the centre of all attraction. Society was charmed and gratified, distinguished men dropped into the box on the grand tier, and whispered their congratulations. The brilliant stream of diamonds in her hair was no brighter than the woman's eyes.

The house was fairly full on the fall of the curtain after the first act of the new opera. There was light and life and movement there. And Melba was scoring new triumphs. The curtain fell on the second act amidst a crash of applause and the waving of handkerchiefs. Leona Lalage had an artistic soul, and she was moved.

"Wonderful!" she cried. "Ah, to have a gift like that. To think that the human voice——"

She paused as some one entered the box. A slight dark man, almost a half caste, with black hair and glasses. He was immaculately dressed ; his style was quiet, with a touch of humility about it.

"Countess," he said. "I kiss your hand. I have come from Paris to see you. If I could have a word with you alone——"

"Louis," the Countess cried, "ah, this is good



of you ! We will have a little chat in the foyer. Hetty, will you keep guard till I return."

Her smile was light and pleasant. But it faded to a white mask once she and her companion were outside the box.

"Quick," she whispered. "Quick. Has the blow fallen ? "

"A blow," said the other. "That is a poor word. It is absolute destruction."

## CHAPTER XXI

### PERIL

ONE quick gasp, a deadly pallor of the face ghastly behind the artificial colouring, and the woman was herself again. She led the way to a secluded seat where they could talk without the chance of being overheard.

"Now tell me about it, Louis," she said.

"Madame, there is but little to tell. You are indebted to that Paris firm for nearly a hundred thousand pounds. They call themselves financial agents, but they are moneylenders of the hardest type. Maitrank is as hard as your diamonds. And he has found you out, Countess."

"Found me out! Why, only yesterday I had a letter from him consenting to a further advance on the property at San Salvator. And after all is said and done, there is a property at San Salvator. On that I have borrowed——"

"Nearly half a million from first to last. I ought to know, for it was I who added those fresh papers to the original deeds and forged those reports of the prosperity of the mine. Maitrank seemed quite satisfied till yesterday. Then he made a great discovery. It was an unfortunate discovery and a cruel piece of luck for you."

"Go on, man. I am all impatience."

"I am coming to the point fast enough. You know Lefevre of Lyons?"

"Of course. Did we not raise money on the San Salvator property from him also? That was nearly a hundred thousand pounds."

"Quite so," Louis Balmayne said coolly, "for I also manipulated those papers. The romance of the mine and the way it came into your possession fascinated Lefevre. He lent you money at a great rate of interest, but he lent it. On him comes the misfortune. Lefevre has been speculating and burnt his fingers badly. He wanted money badly. He comes to Paris to borrow it from Maitrank——"

The Countess smote her fan on her gloves passionately.

"You need not tell me any more," she whispered hoarsely. "He offered the San Salvator as security to Maitrank, and the murder is out."

"Precisely. But not quite in the way you imagine. Directly Maitrank saw those deeds he knew exactly what had happened. But that wonderful man did not betray himself. His confidential secretary told me that he never turned a hair. He simply regretted that he had no spare capital; he got a warrant for your arrest, and he will be in London to-morrow morning."

"Ah! If I could only lay my hands on a good sum, Louis! Then I might induce Maitrank to wait. For the sake of his own pocket he would keep the secret. He will do nothing so long as he can recover part of his own property."

"You are a wonderful woman," Balmayne said admiringly. "You have guessed it. As to the money, it is to your hand. The coast is clear now,

the incumbrance is out of the way. We have only to act at once."

"And where is the money you speak so casually about?"

"The means of safety, madame, seem to me to dangle at the end of a rope."

The woman's eyes gave a flash of triumph.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "I had forgotten that. In the press of other things it had been swept out of my mind. A professional acrobat like yourself should make light of a task like that. The way is all clear for the experiment. But when?"

"What better time could we have than to-night?"

"To-night. Impossible. There are matters to be got ready. My absence at this hour would attract attention. If I could only be in two places at once!"

"So you can," Balmayne said coolly. "I have taken the liberty to borrow the only machine in London that permits you to do that seemingly impossible feat. Put that long cloak over your dress and come with me. It is not your cloak, but it does not matter. I pledge my word that you shall be back here at the end of an hour—long before the performance is over. Come."

There was no further hesitation. This was an adventure after the woman's own heart. With the purloined cloak covering her from head to foot she passed down the steps and into the roadway. Nobody noticed her, for the spectacle was not a very uncommon one. Under the shadow of the portico a little way off stood a motor, watched by a nightbird who would have done anything for a few coppers.

"I like this," Leona Lalage exclaimed, "it braces

the nerves. If those people in New York only do as they promise I shall be free yet. A little courage and I shall pluck safety from the Corner House yet."

The motor passed along swiftly in the darkness. Inside the opera house many people noticed that Countess Lalage's box was only tenanted through the second act of the new opera by a very pretty girl in white, with no ornaments in her hair. Hetty, on the other hand noticed nothing at all but the stage; she had actually forgotten that her employer was not there. The opera was a rare treat to her, and she revelled in music.

There was a veritable scene of triumph at the end of the third act, and whilst the curtain was raised for the second time Countess Lalage and her companion returned. They strolled into the box with the calm air of people quite accustomed to this sort of thing; they might have been merely flirting outside.

"Twelve o'clock," Balmayne whispered; "not a minute later. On this occasion the longest way round will be the shortest way home."

The applause was gradually dying down. Hetty, conscious of a figure behind her, moved back. The box door shut and the air grew oppressive. Leona Lalage, still talking earnestly to her companion, motioned Hetty to open it.

She did so just as a telegraph boy came along with one of the orange-coloured envelopes in his hand. He looked at the address and at the number of the box.

"Box 111, grand tier?" he suggested. "Miss Lawrence?"

"For me," Hetty replied. "What a strange thing!"

The boy passed on whistling under his breath. Outside Hetty opened her message. Her fingers trembled slightly.

"On no account let Countess leave house before midnight," it ran. "When she gets home keep her there till after twelve, at all costs."

## CHAPTER XXII

### FOR LOVE AND DUTY

HETTY gazed at the strange unsigned message with the feeling that she was being made the victim of some foolish joke. But who would play her a silly prank like that? Perhaps Gordon had had something to do with it.

At any rate, she must act. If it turned out to be a hoax she could apologise afterwards. But, on the other hand, it might be a matter of life and death; it might affect her lover's honour. It was a good thing that Hetty had been fortunate to handle the telegram where she could be secluded from the sharp eyes of her employer. Otherwise she would assuredly have betrayed herself. She tore the telegram into tiny fragments and pushed them under the edge of one of the mats. It was far better to be cautious.

She had herself well in hand when she stepped back into the box again. At any hazard she was going to carry out the instructions to the very letter. And she had a fairly good excuse ready to her hand. If Mamie was no better when she got home she would use that as a lever.

The performance came to an end at length. The dapper, smiling little Balmayne handed them both

into the carriage and then went off smoking a cigarette like any honest gentleman whose conscience is at peace. Once home Hetty flew up to her little patient. She seemed to be restless and disturbed.

"Dr. Bruce has been, miss," nurse remarked. "He says Miss Mamie is not to be left alone. The Countess was to be told that."

Hetty was deeply interested. Was this another mere coincidence or was Bruce acting here like a puppet in the hands of the mysterious person who seemed to be pulling the strings in the drama? Anyway, it strengthened her hands.

There was a light supper in the dining-room. Countess Lalage talked fitfully, from time to time glancing at the clock. The gilt hands were striding on towards a quarter to twelve.

"I'm going to make a late call?" Leona Lalage said suddenly.

"I should like you to see Mamie first," said Hetty. She spoke coolly enough, but her heart was beating furiously. "She is not at all well to-night. Dr. Bruce has been here, and says she is not to be left alone. A mother's care——"

The Countess laughed lightly. Her mood seemed friendly.

"Very well," she said. "I'll come up for a moment. I'm not going far, and I shall not be a long time away. If there is a crisis in the case——"

"Mamie is far worse than you imagine," Hetty said coldly. "Your own constitution is so magnificent that you cannot understand weakness in others. If Mamie were mine I should be in grave anxiety about her."

Leona Lalage laughed again. Once more she glanced at the clock.



"Come along then," she said gaily. "I know I am a bad mother."

The child looked flushed and ill, her hand was hot, and she groaned in her sleep. The Countess bent and kissed her carelessly. She moved to her own room and Hetty followed. There was just a touch of hauteur in the manner of the Countess as she intimated that she had nothing further to say.

"Perhaps I have something to say to you," Hetty said between her teeth.

The hour had come to show her pluck and courage, and Hetty was not going to flinch. It wanted ten minutes to twelve by the clock on the dressing-table.

"You are forgetting yourself," the Countess said coldly. "Leave the room."

"When I have finished," Hetty replied. "You heard Dr. Bruce's message. He said that child should not be left. You may urge that I am sufficient, but there is a time for a mother's care. If I had my way you should not go."

It all sounded sorry nonsense in Hetty's ears, but she was playing her part, and merely talking against the clock. With blazing eyes the Countess advanced, but Hetty did not flinch.

"Stand aside," she said furiously, "and let me pass. If it was not for the child and the love she has for you I should dismiss you on the spot. Now go."

"I shall not go," Hetty cried. She was surprised at the ease with which she was working herself up into a genuine passion. "Nor shall you pass. You shall stay here as long as I please. Ring the bell and have me put out."

Sheer astonishment got the better of Leona Lalage's rage. That Hetty above all people should turn upon her like this was amazing. She looked again at the clock, which pointed to four minutes to twelve.

"You are disturbed and hysterical to-night," she said. "Go and lie down. I am a strong woman and if you provoke me too far——"

"You shall not go," Hetty gasped. "I say you shall not go. Nothing less than physical power will induce me to yield."

The anger of the other woman blazed out again magnificently. At the back of her mind was a haunting fear that Hetty was acting a part. It was absolutely imperative that she should leave the house at once. How if Hetty had discovered this and was taking this course to prevent her keeping her appointment?

The mere suggestion added flame to her anger. She caught Hetty by the arm and dragged her from the door. There was a crash and a tear as the dress sleeve parted, the quick rattle of a key in the lock, and a defiant smile from Hetty.

"I may be mad," she gasped, "but there is method in it. I may not——"

A deadly faintness came over her, she staggered to a chair and fell into it. As she did so the great clock on the landing boomed the hour of midnight.

Nothing mattered now, the thing was done, the victory accomplished. In a vague kind of way Hetty heard the cry of rage and disappointment uttered by her companion, she felt the key snatched with cruel force from her hand, there was a whirl of draperies and footsteps flying down the stairs.

Hetty dragged herself to her feet. She was

utterly exhausted with her fight, but there was the fierce triumph of knowing that she had won. She had played her part and the rest of it was in cleverer hands than her own.

Meanwhile the Countess was tugging with impatient fingers at the hasp of the drawing-room windows. There was murder in her heart.

"The little Jezebel," she muttered. "Was it madness, or what? At last!"

The window flew open and she raced down the garden like a hare.

## CHAPTER XXIII

TEN MINUTES PAST TWELVE

**M**R. GARRETT CHARLTON sat in Lawrence's chamber the same evening impatiently waiting for him in response to a telegram. It was already long past eleven, and the visitor was thinking of departing, when Lawrence came in.

He had evidently hurried fast, for he was out of breath. He signified to his companion to sit down, and lighted a cigarette.

"I couldn't possibly come before," he said. "I've been busy all the evening on this business, and as it was I had to leave a little matter to chance. I fancy that you will not be sorry that I persuaded you to stay in London."

"To me it is the gloomiest place in the world," said Charlton.

"That I can easily understand. But you are still of the same opinion—you still value the good name of your dead wife?"

"I would give all I possess in the world to clear it, Lawrence."

"It shall be done; I pledge you my word that it shall be done. I have the key to this mystery—I have had it from the first. That is why I persuaded you not to go away again, and not to let

anybody know you were in London. But we have by no means done with the corner house yet. We are going to spend an hour or so there this very night."

Charlton looked up in quick surprise.

"You and I are going there secretly?" he asked.

"Do you mean now?"

"As soon as I have finished this cigarette," Lawrence said, coolly. "We may be too late to see the beginning of the play, but I have faith in my assistant. Now, come along. You have brought your latchkey as I asked you?"

Charlton nodded. He was a man of few words. He said nothing when Lawrence gave him a pair of goloshes to put over his boots, and in silence the two set out for Raven Street. The place was practically deserted as they came to the house, so that to enter without being seen was a matter of no difficulty.

"We are in time," Lawrence whispered, "in good time. I felt sure I could trust the one I picked out to assist me. If I had not been detained I should have been here before. There is not much for us to do."

"Are we waiting for somebody?" Charlton asked.

"That's it. For the present we have to sit here in the passage with the kitchen door open and watch for the faint gleam of light in the courtyard. It is safe to have a light there because there are blank walls on either side. I think, I rather think, that I am going to astonish you presently."

Charlton said nothing, but from the sound of his laboured breathing it was evident that the spirit of adventure was upon him. They sat there for

some time with the two doors open, so that they might see through the grimy windows into the courtyard beyond. It was weary work, and the minutes passed slowly.

"I'm not a patient man," Lawrence muttered, "but I could manage with a cigarette. Under the circumstances, perhaps I had better not."

Charlton's heavy breathing ceased for a moment.

"I have good sight," he said. "And unless I am greatly mistaken I saw a figure cross the dim light given by yonder window. There it is again."

It was like a shadow and quite as noiseless. Lawrence pressed the slide of his repeater. The rapid little pulse beat twelve and then stopped.

"Between midnight and a quarter past," he muttered. "That's about the time. We had better creep a little closer to the window. That's one advantage of being in a house in the dark—you can see everything that is going on outside without being spotted by anybody. Come along and see what you shall see."

They reached the kitchen window and looked out. There was a figure there, and what looked like another one in the background. A lantern stood on the flags; the first figure pitched something on the ground that looked like a coil of rope.

"What on earth is that?" Charlton asked.

"A rope," Lawrence replied. "Can't you guess what that rope is for?"

"I am afraid I am utterly in the dark, Lawrence," said Charlton.

"Are you? There is a well in that courtyard. And if perchance anything valuable got into that well, I should say that a rope would be the best way of getting it out. Now do you understand?"

Charlton nodded. It had been his whim and mood after the tragic death of his wife to leave those fatal jewels where that wicked woman had dropped them. So far as he was concerned the cause of all the trouble might be at the bottom of the sea. They were gone, and only he and another person knew the secret of their hiding place. That she might come back and try to regain them he never troubled himself about. Even if it had occurred to him, he would not have moved in the matter.

"That fiend probably told some accomplice," he said.

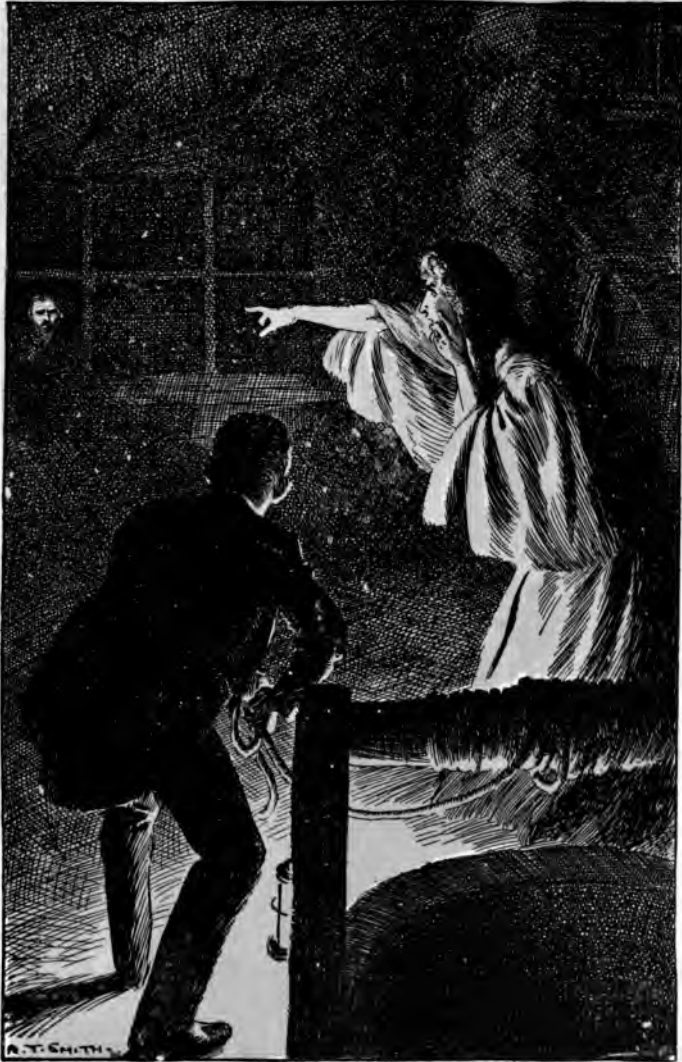
Lawrence chuckled. He could see further than his companion. He could see the figure of a woman dressed in foreign fashion with a shawl over her head. She had long fair hair. Her back was to the window all this time.

"The Spaniard with the mantilla," Lawrence whispered, "the evil genius of the house. We shall see something more presently. Not that we are going to interfere. On the whole, I rather want these people to get the jewels."

Charlton said nothing. He was deeply interested. The man outside raised the lantern, and the dim light fell upon the ghastly outline of Charlton's white set face as he pressed against the panes. At the same instant the woman chanced to glance in the same direction.

Charlton gripped Lawrence's arm with convulsive force.

"Man," he said sternly, "that fiend of a woman was my dead wife's late companion."



“Charlton’s white set face as he pressed against the panes.”

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### TREASURE TROVE

**J**UST as she was, with her lace and silks and long flowing train, Leona Lalage raced down the garden. With a bitter little smile she wondered what her Society friends would say if they could see her at this moment. The thorns of a rose bush caught a drooping mass of frippery and tore it away, but the woman paid no heed. Her dressmaker's bill need never be paid.

She came at length breathless with running to the end of the garden. A little green gate led to the lane which divided Lytton Avenue from the corner house. It was absolutely quiet there. Leona Lalage could catch just the faintest humming noise, then a glaring white eye flamed out.

Behind it was a black motor and the form of Balmayne.

"Never can trust a woman as to time," he growled. There was not the faintest shadow of politeness in his manner now. "Didn't I say twelve sharp?"

"I was detained," the Countess gasped. "After all, what are a few minutes?"

"Everything. Maitrank reaches Charing Cross

in a little over half an hour, and it is absolutely imperative that I should see the arrival and find out where he stays. I suppose you can see that ? ”

The Countess had no more to say. She held out her hand silently. She tore all her long train of lace and silk away as if it had been rags, she buttoned a cloak over her dress ; a blonde wig and lace shawl over her head completed the disguise.

“ Come along,” she said. “ I’ve got the key of the courtyard. Not that we are in the least likely to find anything there ? ”

“ And why not ? ” Balmayne growled. “ Stranger things have happened. I know a poor man at this minute who owns one of the richest gold mines in the world. He won’t work it because when the gold was found he quarrelled with his partner on the spot and killed him. That’s a fact.”

“ I’d get it out of him,” Leona said between her teeth. “ I’d like to bind him and torture him bit by bit until he yelled out the truth. Well, Charlton was always a strange man, and the jewels may be there yet. That is one of the reasons why I took up my abode in Lytton Avenue.”

“ One of the reasons,” Balmayne said sardonically.

“ Never mind that, we know too much about one another to say much. I’ll open the door whilst you push the motor in. Quiet as the grave.”

It was very quiet and still there when once the gates were closed. Balmayne took one of the lamps from the motor and extinguished the other. In the centre of the place was the well, partially covered over by a flat stone. There was a windlass, but no rope. Balmayne produced one. Very

carefully he fitted it to the windlass. His dark eyes gleamed and dilated.

Quickly he lowered the rope till the bulge of it showed that the bottom was reached. He wound up the rope again, and as he did so a grunt of satisfaction escaped him. It was far better than he had expected.

"Here's a piece of rare good luck," he exclaimed. "Why, the well is dry."

"I always heard that there was only a foot or two of water in there," the Countess said. "It was never used in my time—people don't care to drink well water in London. Still, it is a slice of luck, as you say."

"Got to get down there all the same," Balmayne grunted. "I'll make a loop in the rope and put my foot in it. You used to be pretty strong at one time. I suppose you can manage to let me down safely?"

Leona smiled with contempt as she surveyed the slim figure before her. She was always proud of her strength. She bared her beautiful white arm and showed the strong sinews and muscles under the skin.

"You need not be afraid," she said. "If I couldn't—ah!"

She broke off, her voice rose to a scream. She grew whiter far than the linen about her shoulders. Balmayne laid his hand on her mouth in an instant.

"Fool," he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Do you want to bring the police upon me?"

Leona pointed to the window, against which Charlton's face had been pressed a moment before. The dimness of it, the stern accusing eyes made up a picture so grim, so ghostly, that the woman's

heart turned to water within her. The fear of yesterday took the strength out of her limbs.

"The face," she gasped, "the face of Charlton. At the window. It was just for an instant, and seemed to read my soul. Can't you see it?"

Balmayne could see nothing, and said so bluntly. As a matter of fact, the face was gone. But the terror of the Countess still remained.

"Of course, there was no face there," Balmayne flared out. "That's the worst of doing this kind of thing with a woman—one never knows when she's going to have an attack of nerves. The idea of Charlton standing at the window and knowing what we are going to do is too good. Pull yourself together."

The trembling fit passed away, the woman was herself again. All the same, Balmayne was not without misgiving as he put his foot in the loop. But the crank of the windlass turned steadily and smoothly, the stone walls slid by, and presently the adventurer stood at the bottom of the well. There was no water, nothing but a slight dampness underfoot.

A moment later and Balmayne was up again. Leona Lalage looked at him enquiringly. He had no breath to speak. With gleaming eyes Balmayne held two rusty old cases over his head. Leona grasped the motor lamp, and Balmayne forced back the clasps of the cases.

"Got them," he croaked. "What do you think of this, my noble Countess?"

A stream of living fire, a ripple of all the colours of the rainbow. Balmayne shut the cases as if jealous of the eyes of the night.

"Saved," he said. "Take these and hide them,

take the rope and hide that. I must be off to Charing Cross like the wind. This is, perhaps, the best night's work I have had in my experience. Now begone."

A moment later and the courtyard was deserted.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A CHECK

"**N**O you don't," said Lawrence coolly. "Of course, it would be a very dramatic finish to the night's adventure, but I can't permit it. Go easy."

Charlton gave up the struggle. Those jewels, the cause of all his misfortunes, had lain there at the bottom of the well where he had intended them to stay. He hated the very mention of them. Had not diamonds inspired some of the most awful crimes since crime began?

They should stay there for all time, those stones with the blood upon them, but now, when they were being carried off by the woman who had robbed him of all that life holds dear, Charlton's passion flared out.

He would have followed those people and demanded them. But Lawrence held him back until his passion was spent. He yielded suddenly.

"After all it matters little," he said.

"It matters a great deal," Lawrence replied.

"You want your jewels back——"

"My dear sir, the first beggar in the street can have them for all I care."

"Well, you don't want those people to get them.

Neither will they for long. It is all part of my little scheme. If you had dashed out just now you would certainly have caused a great sensation, and there would have been a great gap in the dazzling ranks of fashion, but you would have ruined my plans."

"But will those people be punished eventually?"

"Of course they will. But there are viler crimes than the theft of diamonds. There is the conspiracy to rob a good man of his good name, to make the lives of that man and the girl he is going to marry dark for the sake of a passing caprice. I tell you this has been done, and a murder has been committed in the doing of it. And I am going to get to the bottom of the foul tangle."

It was not the usual voice of Gilbert Lawrence that spoke. There was a dogged grimness about him that would have surprised his friends. "Let us light the gas and smoke here for a time," he said. "There is not the slightest chance of those people coming back, and there are no windows overlooking this one. I have a good deal to say to you."

Charlton made no objection. He was evidently in the company of a man who knew quite well what he was doing.

"I will be guided entirely by you," he said. "You tell me that that vile woman will be punished, and I believe you. Strange that she should be mixed up with the lives of people you care for also. You must have been sure of your ground to let her escape you to-night."

Lawrence flicked the ash from his cigarette.

"I am," he said. "See, I am familiar with her plot before she carried it out. As I told you before, the whole thing is founded on a novel of



mine which has yet to be published. How she got the thing is a mystery. But she has got it. It could not possibly have been a coincidence."

"If you know where she lives——" Charlton began.

"My dear sir, I know who she is. From the very moment that Bruce told his strange story I felt pretty certain that the Spanish business was a disguise."

"But it is no disguise. My wife's companion was a Spanish blonde."

"Then during the time that woman was in your house she wore a wig. You may make yourself pretty clear on that point. The creature you saw to-night in the courtyard has no doubt passed at different times under many names, but to the world she is at present known as Countess Lalage."

"I have heard of her. But she is very rich."

"So most people think. To my mind she is a brilliant adventuress. With beauty and brains and audacity a woman like that never need want for money. Of course, the crash will come sooner or later, but meanwhile she is having a good time. But you are going to see my patience rewarded. A murder has been committed here, and that woman knows all about it. Out of that murder came the terrible charge that hangs over my friend Bruce, and she knows all about that. I know all about it, too, but knowing and proving are two very different things. It is a fight in the dark between us, but I am going to win at the finish."

"You wouldn't force her to confess?"

"Not a woman like that. Get her back to the

wall and she will be dangerous. Bless the man, if she knew I was her antagonist she would not hesitate to ask me to dinner and poison me over one of her excellent dishes. When I strike I must strike her down to the ground. My lines are laid pretty carefully, and she is going into them one by one. She walked into one of them to-night."

"Did you know that she was coming here?"

"My dear sir, I was the means of letting her know the jewels were still in the well. She is very hard up for money—I found that out at her house the other night—and that is why I waited here this evening. She is playing out my story, you see. And she has gone off for the present with your diamonds."

"Which will be a powerful weapon in her hands."

Lawrence laughed silently. He seemed to be intensely amused about something. He took a flat brown paper parcel from his pocket.

"You saw those people go off with the diamonds," he said. "You saw those gems flash and dazzle in the light of the lamp. I am going to give you a surprise now, and the surprise of our predatory friends will come later on. Your wife's gems were three rows of diamonds and a collar of the same set plain in silver."

"How did you know that?" Charlton asked.

Lawrence proceeded to unpack his parcel. Inside were two cases which he opened and exposed in the light of the flaming gas.

"Will you have the goodness to look at these," he asked.

Charlton did so. There was a blank surprise on his face.

"I should like to know what you make of them," said Lawrence.

"Amazing!" Charlton cried. "Why, these are my wife's diamonds, the real stones beyond doubt."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE BLACK MOTOR

A CERTAIN sense of elation had taken possession of Hetty. She had been tried in the fire, and she had not been found wanting. She had done her work well, and she knew it. And she was not quite satisfied. Things were going on here that she ought to know. At any moment she might come across important information that would be of the greatest use to Gordon. She no longer had the slightest doubt that the Countess was at the bottom of the business that threatened to deprive him of his good name.

As soon as the weakness was passed, she followed Leona Lalage. She heard the latter fumbling with the sash of the drawing-room window, she felt the sudden rush of air. The owner of the house had barely reached the garden before Hetty was after her. It was all for Gordon's sake, she told herself; for him she would do anything.

She crept on until the green door in the wall was reached. It was risky to peep out, but Hetty had to hazard that. The black motor car was in front of her, so that she was behind the gleaming lights. With a thrill Hetty recognized that motor. It was the same one that she had seen leaving the

Corner House on the morning of the murder. She was destined to see more of it before long. But she saw other things ; she saw Leona tear the skirt of her dress away ; a wild cry of surprise rose to her lips, but she choked it down. Here before her was the Spanish woman of Gordon's story. The sudden flood of light set Hetty trembling from head to foot.

For the present she was not destined to obtain further information. The big gates of the courtyard of the Corner House was closed upon her. But she waited. Wit ! Her little white teeth shut together ; she would have waited there all night. She heard Lalage's sudden cry ; she heard the muttered conversation that followed.

She was only just in time to get back behind the green gates when the Countess emerged again with something in her hand. Her head was held high, her eyes gleamed with triumph. Then the great black car shot noiselessly away, and Hetty crept back to the house.

She managed to gain her bedroom unseen, she stood with a fast-beating heart at the head of the landing listening. All the servants had gone to bed long ago, there were only one or two of the electrics burning.

A moment later Countess Lalage came out of her bedroom and swept down the stairs. All signs of her disguise had gone ; she was dressed from head to foot in a new and magnificent gown, black set off with red, her diamonds flashed and streamed in the light. Evidently the adventures of the night were not over, for the Countess would not have taken all that trouble had she not expected some one.

Hetty crept back to her room and softly closed the door. She could hear the snap of the electric switches as Leona Lalage proceeded from room to room downstairs until the whole place was brilliant with light. Evidently some one was to be welcomed royally. And crime and light do not go very well together.

Or perhaps it was a crime. With all the servants in bed anybody alone with Leona Lalage and Balmayne would have a dangerous time.

"I must see further into this," Hetty told herself. "When this honoured guest comes I will creep downstairs and listen. It's not a very nice thing to do, but if ever the end justifies the means, surely this is a case in point."

She had to listen and wait a long time. Meanwhile the black motor was throbbing its way to Charing Cross. It was quite late as it passed under the archway into the station. But, strange to say, the motor was no longer black, but it gleamed with lacquer and steel and brass like the perfect beauty that it was.

There were only a few passengers by the train, one an old bent man with a grey moustache and a hooked nose coming down over it. His boots and hat and gloves were shabby enough, but his fur-lined overcoat, which he wore in spite of the warm night, was a magnificent garment of real sable. He stepped along the platform absently. As he looked round for a cab, Balmayne hailed him.

"Can I be of any service to you, Herr Maitrank?" he asked.

The little man's eyes twinkled shrewdly. He seemed to be amused about something.

"What a lucky meeting," he exclaimed. "If that

is your motor you can drive me to the Metropole and sup with me. You are a clever young man, so clever that you will not pretend this meeting is an accident."

"I'm not going to try and deceive you," said Balmayne. "I'm going to play the game with all the cards on the table."

"So? Then you know why I am here?"

"Yes. You have come to look into Countess Lalage's affairs."

"With a view to saving myself the loss of many thousand pounds. The money itself would not make much difference to me, but I love my money. To make it is the whole end and aim of my life. Lie to me, deceive me, abuse me, anything you like, and I care nothing. But rob me of money, ah!"

The little beady eyes gleamed angrily, the speaker spat furiously.

"I found out by chance," he went on. "A bit of good luck showed me how I had been swindled. But I said nothing—ah, I said nothing, because in this case silence is golden! And nobody knows but myself. Thinks I, that woman is a long way from being played out yet—she has resources. Some people would have made a fuss and cried out and spoilt everything, but not so Maitrank. I come here to get my money and I shall have it, mark you. But I am not easy in my mind."

"About your money, Herr Maitrank?"

"About my money! No. I shall get that all right. What I am uneasy about is this: How did you know I was coming, and why?"

Balmayne shrugged his shoulders.

"That is my affair," he said. "Perhaps I have

been prepared for this—perhaps I have had a watch kept on you. But no matter. We have had time and we are ready. Will you come and see the Countess now ? ”

Maitrank hesitated a moment and nodded.

“ It will give me a good supper free,” he said, “ and a glass of wine. And if you try any tricks on me, heaven help you, for I won’t ! ”



## CHAPTER XXVII

### A GLASS OF WINE

HETTY'S patience was rewarded at last. She could hear the faint murmur of the motor in the street ; there was a sudden gush of air as the front door opened, and the voice of the Countess in her most honeyed tones as she ushered somebody into the dining-room. Instantly the girl crept downstairs and hid herself behind the portière over the door. It was an audacious thing to do, but her audacity paid, as it generally does.

All the lights in the room were ablaze ; at one end of the table was a dainty supper, flanked by a couple of gold-topped bottles. A little shabby man with a hooked nose was in the act of taking off a heavy fur-lined coat.

"How good of you to come," the Countess said. "Sit down and let me wait upon you—there is no need at all to ring for the servants. You can talk and eat at the same time. There ! I will give you some of the cigarettes you are so fond of."

The meal was finished presently. Hetty caught the scent of cigarette smoke. The Countess lounged back in her chair, smoking too. She seemed perfectly self-possessed. She looked so easy and

comfortable that Maitrank was filled with admiration."

"You are quite well and blooming?" he asked.  
"Ah, it is an easy conscience."

"I've no conscience at all," the Countess laughed.  
"If I had possessed such a thing I should not be here at this moment."

Maitrank muttered. "Perhaps not. Also you would not have robbed me of the best part of £100,000. Charming swindler, where is my money?"

"Most courteous of Shylocks, it is all spent. I am going to be frank with you, which is very virtuous on my part, seeing that you have found me out. That San Salvator property is worth exactly nothing. Also it is mortgaged in four places. But for a bit of pure bad luck I should have got more out of you for it."

"Ay, ay," Maitrank showed his yellow fangs in a grin, "that is true. Go on."

"You have found me out and I must pay you. It is no question of honour, I am bound to do so to save my face. But meanwhile I must find another victim."

"Meanwhile you will do nothing of the sort," said the usurer. "I am not going to wait. Give me half and I will hold the sword suspended for a fortnight. Give me those diamonds, and I will write a receipt for £30,000."

A little flush of colour crept into Leona Lalage's cheek.

"They are worth half as much again," she cried.  
"You are a coward to take advantage of your position like that, and with a woman too."

Maitrank grinned again, in no way abashed.

"I never want another woman like you to deal

with," he said. "I prefer a man, however great a scoundrel he may be. But you would have robbed me; I have turned the tables on you. And I am going to squeeze you. Give me those diamonds, take a receipt for the sum I mentioned, and I wait a fortnight."

"And if I refuse your offer?" said Leona between her teeth.

Maitrank glanced meaningly round the luxurious room. He took in the works of art, the carpets and skins, the flowers, and the soft shaded light.

"This place is more comfortable than a gaol," he said coolly.

He saw nothing of the murderous look in the eyes of his companion. Nobody had seen him enter the house, nobody even knew that he was in London. All the servants had gone to bed. Lalage had by her hand an accomplice ready for anything.

She checked the words that rose to her lips. She produced pen, ink, and paper. With a passionate gesture she tore the diamonds from her throat and breast and hair.

"Take them," she said hoarsely; "take them and write me a receipt at once before I repent. Better do anything than come between a woman and her jewels. There, a glass of wine. To your speedy ruin and destruction."

She poured out the amber liquid from a fresh bottle into a fresh glass and drank it down. With a shaking hand she filled another glass for Maitrank, who accepted it gallantly. The diamonds he slipped coolly into his pocket.

"Never lose your temper," he said. "It leads to apoplexy. Ah, my fine madam, you thought to pinch me, but I have pinched you instead."

The Countess rose with her eyes blazing. She pointed to the door.

"Begone!" she cried. "Go, before I do you mischief. See, I help you on with your coat. Now go, and don't let me see that ugly yellow face of yours for a fortnight."

Maitrank chuckled as he passed down the steps. A policeman bade him good-night, a policeman chatting to a man in evening dress. The policeman passed along the empty road, the other followed Maitrank. A second later and Maitrank staggered, and fell headlong in the roadway.

The policeman had passed out of sight now. Like a flash the man in evening dress was upon the form of the unconscious capitalist. He was picked up as if he had been a feather-weight. An instant later and he was back at No. 1, Lytton Avenue, again.

"Quick!" the Countess whispered. "You managed that very cleverly, Balmayne. We have a credible witness who saw this creature leave the house, thanks to you."

"And the idea of drugging the glass before pouring out the wine, thanks to you," said Balmayne. "I must get this chap through the garden and on the motor at once. Give me a few minutes' start, and he's not likely to trouble us again."

Hetty sped from her hiding-place through the hall into the garden. The little green gate was open, and beyond the motor, once more in its black guise. Hetty stood there just a minute, wondering what next she should do. If there was only somebody near that she could confide in and send a message by! If she could only prevent Balmayne from starting on his mysterious errand!

There was no time to be lost, for she could hear Balmayne coming down the garden. And then a happy inspiration came to her. From her head she removed the gold and ornamented dagger, with its long steel pin. She stooped down. . .

Balmayne came with his burden, which he flung in and covered with a rug. He pulled at the lever, and the great machine started, and then dragged, as if some great weight was hanging on behind.

A snarling curse came from Balmayne's lips.

"A thousand maledictions on it!" he muttered.

"Both back tires are punctured!"

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### BAFFLED

**B**ALMAYNE danced down the lane with impotent fury. Despite her peril and the fear that was in her heart, Hetty smiled. Here was a daring and audacious rascal engaged in some desperate and, no doubt, cunning scheme who was utterly baffled by a mere girl and a hairpin.

Hetty checked the smile, for that might have grown hysterical. She had to brace herself to the effort, an easier task seeing that Gordon Bruce was uppermost in her mind. For him she would have dared and done anything. The woman who was at the bottom of this thing was his deadly enemy. To gain her secrets must help in Gordon's final victory.

Balmayne knelt down there with one of the lamps in his hand. His face was not good to look upon. Leona Lalage watched him eagerly.

"Is it a very bad puncture?" she asked.

"It isn't a puncture at all," Balmayne snarled, "at least not an accidental one. Some mischievous fiend must have passed down the lane just now and done this for pure wickedness. There are two long slashes in the tyres."

"And the mending will be a matter of time?"

"Rather. An expert couldn't do it under an hour. Both those tyres will have to come off. Now what are we to do?"

The Countess clasped her hands together in hopeless rage.

"If I only had that ruffian here!" she said. Her voice was low, she strode backwards and forwards like an angry wolf. "Oh, if I only had him here! I should like you to hold him down so that I——"

"Drop it," Balmayne said rudely. "What's the good of that theatrical nonsense? If something is not done at once our plans are utterly ruined. Don't stand there like a tragedy actress, but suggest something."

"But what can I suggest? This thing has taken me utterly by surprise. The only thing is to carry that thing back into the street and lay him down where you found him. A policeman saw him leave the house. It will be thought that he had a fit in the street, and we shall not be suspected."

"And meanwhile the policeman on the beat has been at least twice past the spot where the body ought to be," Balmayne sneered. "People in fits don't get out of the way and then come back again."

"True," the Countess exclaimed. "I had not thought of that. Wheel your motor into the courtyard of the Corner House before a policeman comes this way, and carry him back into the house."

There was nothing else to do, and Balmayne complied, muttering. The autocar was disposed of, and Balmayne, breathless and dripping under the weight of his burden, staggered back into Lytton Avenue Gardens again. Once the little green gate was closed he could breathe more freely.

But the perils and dangers of the night were not over yet.

The unconscious form of Maitrank was cast carelessly on the grass. Balmayne wiped his heated forehead. The moon came out from behind a ragged bank of cloud and fell on the face of the sleeping capitalist. It was so white and still that he might have been dead already.

The white, still face looked up, the murderous dark one looked down. Balmayne kicked the body in a sudden spurt of passion.

"You miserly old dog," he growled. "A nice dance you are leading us. I wish I knew what on earth to do with you."

The Countess gripped his arm convulsively.

"Kill him," she said in a hoarse whisper that thrilled Hetty. "That is a sure and easy way out of the peril. We can prove that he left the house, nobody can prove that he ever returned. I have my jewels back; there is nothing that we can be traced by. And the secret dies with him."

Balmayne gave a shudder. Even he recoiled.

"I have never had that on my conscience," he whispered. "And if we do——"

"Kill him," urged the Countess. "Kneel down and pin that wrap over his face. He is an old man, and the drug has affected his heart. He will go off quietly in his sleep. Then you can throw him down the well in the courtyard of the Corner House."

"Can I help you?" cried Hetty, with a voice so steady that it astonished herself. "I had a dreadful headache, so I thought I would steal down into the garden. Have you killed a burglar or something of that kind?"

Leona Lalage was the first to recover herself.



"Something of that kind," she said. "My friend Mr. Balmayne was bringing my motor back when he found this poor fellow unconscious in the lane. Mr. Balmayne called out to me for assistance and I fortunately heard."

Hetty nodded. Truly the woman was magnificent.

"Had you not best get him into the house?" Hetty suggested. "It is not cold, but any one who is ill, to lie on the damp grass——"

The Countess touched Balmayne. She had turned her face away, fearful lest the expression of it should be seen.

"Convey him into the house," the Countess ordered.

There was nothing for it now but to obey. Hetty followed slowly and crept up to her own bedroom. Once there, she dropped into a chair, and just for the moment the whole world seemed to be whirling before her sightless eyes.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

**B**UT it was not for long that Hetty remained like that. There was much to be done yet and much to learn. The thought of Gordon spurred her on. If she could get this woman into her power and force her to speak, all would be well. Hetty never doubted for a moment that Leona Lalage was at the bottom of her lover's misfortunes.

If she could only communicate with Gordon ! But how was that to be done ? Hetty thought for a moment. Then the inspiration came to her. In her stockinged feet she crept down to the basement to the housekeeper's room and closed the door behind her. She was not more than a minute gone, and when she reached her room again it was with the knowledge that she could count on somebody now.

These two fiends would not dare to do him any harm now. All the same, Hetty made up her mind not to go to bed. She had Mamie in her own room, the door of which she left purposely open. If the worst came to the worst she could ring the electric alarm on the top landing and rouse the household. Mamie was sleeping peacefully with her head on her hand.

"You poor little soul?" Hetty murmured.  
"Ah, you poor little soul!"

Meanwhile the precious twain downstairs had laid their burden on a couch in the dining-room. Balmayne himself poured out a glass of wine, and carried it unsteadily to his lips. He was worn out and shaking; he did not know what to do. It was not often that he was so hopelessly beaten as this.

"A mischievous boy with a pocket knife, and a white-faced cat of a governess with a headache," she said, bitterly. "It's maddening to think of a little thing like that coming between us and our schemes. And if I thought for a moment that Hetty Lawrence really suspected anything——"

"Pshaw!" Balmayne growled. "She doesn't suspect anything. Her manner was too simple and natural for that. And the girl carries her goodness and purity in her face. Oh, you can laugh, but that girl lives in another world than ours. When I looked at her just now, she reminded me of what I might have been."

The Countess gave a low, scornful laugh. Balmayne sentimental was amusing. She had the profoundest contempt herself for girls of Hetty's type. It was always a mystery to her what men could see in them.

"Well, she saved us from murder to-night," Balmayne said, looking grimly down into the white face on the sofa. "By Jove, he's coming to!"

Maitrank stirred and stirred uneasily. Then he opened his eyes and stared round him. His quick, active mind was beginning to work. But those eyes were a little uneasy and fearsome as they saw both Leona and Balmayne there.

"What has happened?" Maitrank asked. "Have

I been asleep or what? There's something that seems to burn into my brain. Have I been ill?"

"Looks like it!" said Balmayne. "You left here all right some time ago."

"I know. I remember that now. I said good-night to the Countess—eh, eh, the Countess!—and there was a policeman outside talking to a man in evening dress. He said good-night to me and I walked down the road. I don't recollect anything else."

He paused in some confusion. He had the profoundest respect for the cunning and audacity of the people with whom he had to deal. Was this some startling new plot that they had been working on him?

"Then how did I get back again?" he asked.

"I found you in the road," Balmayne said boldly. "I was going away from here, seeing that my services were no longer required. I happened to find you. I was just in time, for one of the street prowlers was going through your pockets. Probably your fur coat attracted his attention. It is fortunate——"

Maitrank plunged his hands into his pockets.

"I have been robbed!" he cried, "robbed of those diamonds! Ah, tell me what is this new trick you have played on me! Help! Help!"

He yelled aloud. The scream of rage and disappointment rang through the house. It caused a servant to turn over sleepily and wonder what the matter was, it roused little Mamie, and brought her up in bed with a scream of fear. Hetty heard it too, and wondered if murder was not being committed after all.

She could not stand there doing nothing. She

ran downstairs and burst into the dining-room. She had a good excuse at the end of her tongue. The Countess turned upon her fiercely and demanded what she was doing there.

"Mamie," Hetty said simply. "The child has been greatly frightened. She is calling for you. Will you please go up at once?"

It was all so simple and natural that Leona Lalage could say nothing for a moment. The stranger was standing up searching his pockets wildly. His eyes gleamed with hatred and defeat and baffled avarice. He knew that he had been made the victim of some trick, but there was no name for it yet.

"I will come up," Leona said, anything to get Hetty out of the room. "It is very unfortunate that this should have happened here."

The door closed behind them. Maitrank's fingers crooked and reached for Balmayne.

"Dog," he hissed, "dog, I'll be even with you yet. How it has been managed I do not know yet, but I shall find out. My diamonds, give me my diamonds."

Balmayne took the bare throat of the speaker in his grip and shook Maitrank as a reed is shaken in the wind.

"Be silent!" he hissed; "have a care or——"

He paused. There was a loud imperious knocking at the front door.

## CHAPTER XXX

### PROUT GETS A CLUE

SERGEANT PAUL PROUT was beginning to come to the conclusion that the Corner House mystery would have to be relegated to the long list of crimes concerning which Scotland-yard is fain to be silent. At any rate, the matter was utterly beyond him. Given a clue to work on, no man in the force could display more tenacity and skill. But there was nothing to go upon, and Prout was utterly devoid of imagination.

Of course, there was always the chance of coming on the track obliquely. None knew better than Prout how frequently one crime interlocked with another, and how often in looking for one particular criminal another had been arrested.

He came into the inspector's office in answer to a summons. Inspector Manton passed over some papers to his subordinate.

"I want you to read them and act upon them," he said. "You'll have to put that Corner House business out of your head for a day or two at any rate. It appears that a gang of cosmopolitan swindlers have established their headquarters somewhere in Soho, and by means of using several addresses they are getting a tremendous quantity of goods which they proceed to turn into money.

Here is one of their advertisements cut from the *Standard*. You had better answer it, and get in touch with the fellows that way. But nobody can manage that sort of thing better than you."

Prout felt himself quite capable to account for this matter. He proceeded to lay the whole particulars before a friend in the wholesale silver-plate line—just the kind of article the gang of thieves affected—and so procured the genuine address of a genuine trader for the purposes of the capture.

"I expect you'll get orders from five or six addresses," said Prout. "If so, send the stuff on, not too much at a time, and ask for references. You'll get the reference, of course; in other words, Jones and Company, of Gray's Inn, will recommend Smith and Company, of Market Street. When you get all the references in let me know, because by that means I shall be in possession of every address used by these fellows.

To keep the big swindle going on and to avoid awkward mistakes it was necessary for the confederates to meet at intervals. By small purchases at one address or another Prout had pretty well got to know all the gang by sight, and by following one or another he discovered at last where the rendezvous was—a public-house of not too good repute in White Lane, leading off Oxford Street.

Next day a sallow, seedy, broken-down shop assistant sought and obtained a bedroom at the *Orange Tree* public-house. He seemed to have money, and therefore he was welcome. He hinted that he was "in trouble" over some stolen goods from his late employer's shop, and the *Orange Tree* received him with open arms.

It was weary work sitting there and pretending

to drink, but patience has its reward at last. Gradually the shy swindlers became accustomed to the seedy shop assistant, who even went out of his way to give them hints as to credulous firms. It seemed to Prout that he knew all the gang at last save one.

And this one he particularly wanted to see, because the name was unknown to him. In all the swindlers in London it was the first time Prout had heard of one called "Frenchy." And the particular member of the gang—absent from London on business—seemed to be the leader of them all. Once Frenchy showed himself, Prout would give the sign, and within an hour the gang would be laid by the heels.

He came at length, a little dapper man, with a slight hump between the shoulders, a nose slightly crooked on one side. He appeared to take his warm welcome quite as a matter of course, he discarded a pair of grey suède gloves, and called for a bottle of champagne.

Behind his paper Prout gave a start. Here was a case where the pursuit of one crime led to another. The leader of the gang of thieves had large orange coloured freckles on his hand the same as Prout had seen on the hands of the victim of the Corner House tragedy.

Prout was calm again in an instant. In a dejected way he was looking admiringly at the new-comer. The little man's English was quite good, but all the same he spoke with an accent that had a strange French flavour about it.

Just on closing time Prout lounged out in his most dejected style, and bought a late paper.

"Now, look here," he said to the man with the papers. "Those men are to be arrested, but so



far away from here as not to give any suspicion of the house being watched. The little dandy chap who just came in is to be left to me. That's all."

Apparently it was quite sufficient. As the gang separated one by one, each was picked up by an officer in plain clothes. The little man in the suède gloves went cautiously on till he came to a working-man's flat off Gray's Inn Road, and here for the first time he became conscious that he was being followed.

"And what do you want with me?" he asked.

"So, you are the young man who got into trouble over a mistake as to your employer's goods."

"I want to speak to you for a moment," said Prout.

The little man pointed gaily up the stairs. Prout followed him into a room and shut the door. The next instant the small Frenchman was on his back and the handcuffs encircled his wrists.

"No use making a noise here," said Prout coolly.

"It was a good idea of yours to hide yourself amongst respectable working men."

The little man struggled silently, furiously.

"Now, what's the good of that?" said Prout in his most soothing voice. "With these bracelets on you can't possibly get at the revolver in your hip pocket. I am a police officer, and by this time the whole of your lot are in custody. I've got the key of the door in my pocket, and I'm going to search the room."

The little man's language burst out furiously. Nothing less than war between France and England should wipe out this insult to the tricolor. Prout had burst open a desk and was examining the papers there as tranquilly as if he were stone deaf. He

came across something presently that caused his eyes to gleam and his heart to beat with a feeling of triumph.

"Now you can come along with me," he said. "If you like to walk you can, and if you like to pay for a cab I am agreeable. What do you say?"

The little man elected to have a cab. When Bow Street was reached Prout had the satisfaction of finding that all his birds had been netted. He received the warm congratulations of his inspector modestly.

"Got your case complete?" asked the latter.

"I've done more than that, sir," said Prout. "I've stumbled on something important relating to that Corner House business. And if you don't want me any more, I'd like to go and see Mr. Gilbert Lawrence."

There was nothing more to be done for the present. Ten minutes later Prout was knocking at the door of Lawrence's chambers.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### AN URGENT CALL

LAWRENCE was burning the midnight oil, and therefore impatient of interruptions. But upon hearing Prout's name he finished the chapter he was writing, and slung up his reading lamp. He was hospitable over his cigarette and whisky.

"Come to tell me you have made a discovery, eh?" he asked. "No need to tell me that, I can see it in your face. Sit down man—one o'clock in the morning is comparatively early for a novelist. Go on."

"It's a great discovery, sir," said Prout. "I have found the brother of the murdered man."

"What, the Corner House victim? Is that really a fact?"

"Indeed it is, sir. A good deal better looking than the other poor fellow, but directly I set eyes upon him I couldn't fail to see the likeness. And when he took off his gloves, and showed the big orange spots, I felt certain."

"I suppose you can lay hands upon him at any time?"

"Rather!" Prout grinned. "He's my prisoner. Arrested him to-night in connection with some long

firm frauds. I arrested him in his own lodgings so that I should have a chance to search the room, and what did I come across but a few letters written by the murdered man to this brother of his."

"Surely, a curious coincidence!" Lawrence cried.

"Not at all, sir. There's a marvellous free-masonry amongst criminals. I've started a hunt for a watch and chain, and found a bank robbery. Once in looking for a missing man I dropped upon a sensational bankruptcy. One never knows. But touching these letters. They are undoubtedly the same handwriting as the letter we found on the Corner House victim. I've put them together, and I am certain."

"Do they contain anything likely to help us, Prout?"

"Well, that I can't say for the present, sir," Prout replied. "I have only looked at one. Seeing that you are so interested, I came here at once. But one thing I have discovered—if I was a creditor of a certain Countess who shall be nameless, I should go and sit on the doorstep until I had got the money."

Lawrence winked never so slightly. He had his own ideas on that head. He read the one letter that Prout handed to him and smiled. Beyond doubt the letter had been written by the queer mis-shapen outcast who had been found dead in the Corner House. As Lawrence returned the letter he looked at his watch.

"It wants some time of two o'clock yet," he said.

"My friend, Dr. Bruce, does not go to bed early, so I shall go round and look him up. We'll go into the other letters carefully when we have time, Prout, but for the present I should like to borrow

this one if you have no objection. What do you say ? ”

Prout had no objection to make. He had made a great discovery, but he felt pretty sure that he would need Lawrence's ingenious mind and fine imagination before he had succeeded in solving the problem.

“ Take it, and welcome, sir,” he said. “ I shall have my hands full for the next day or two, and anyway there is no hurry.”

With the feeling that great events were in the air, Lawrence hurried round to Bruce's rooms. There was a light in the front window that disclosed the fact that Bruce had not gone to bed. He came to the door himself, looking fagged and worn out.

“ I have had a trying day,” he said. “ My dear fellow, I am losing my connection almost as fast as I made it. I shall have to give it up.”

“ Rot ! ” Lawrence cried. “ I've got some news for you. Prout has been with me and has left a letter in my possession. What do you think of that ? ”

Bruce read the letter slowly and carefully. Beyond establishing the fact that the murdered man had a brother he could see very little in it.

“ Unless there are other letters,” he concluded.

“ There are five more which I have not read yet. I understand there are allusions to a certain Countess who, as Prout politely put it, shall be nameless. My boy, I feel quite certain that this will lead to— what's up ? ”

The shrill clatter of the telephone bell tinkled in the next room. The ring was repeated in a few seconds imperiously.

“ The telephone for me,” said Bruce. “ I hope

I shan't have to go out to-night. I'll get you to excuse me for a moment. . . . Are you there ? ”

A whispered voice came back ; it was Hetty's voice :

“ For heaven's sake come here at once. Don't wait, but——”

The voice ceased ; nothing more could be heard but the humming of the wire. Bruce swished into the dining-room and huddled on his coat.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### TOUCH AND GO

BALMAYNE relaxed his grip of the old man's throat as the knocking was repeated. Some accident might have happened, but on the other hand it was possible that there was some real and tangible danger here.

"I didn't mean to go quite so far," he muttered. "Only this time you have made the grand mistake of your life. Be silent now and you shall get your jewels back. It is the only way."

Maitrank nodded breathlessly. He did not lack pluck, but he was an old man and the rapidity of events dazed him. All the glittering electrics in the room were whirling like a wheel.

"I'm not going away till I've got them," he said doggedly.

Balmayne hastened to the door. He might want some ready lie ; on the other hand, his diplomacy might be needed. But he set his teeth a trifle closer as he saw Dr. Bruce standing there. "I have been called," he said.

"In that case come this way," Balmayne replied. He dared not ask a direct question. He was racking his brains to know who had summoned

the doctor, and why. "There is nothing the matter.

"I did not gather that from Miss Lawrence's message," said Bruce uneasily.

Balmayne concealed a smile. He had got it. There was only one way in which Hetty could have summoned her lover, and that was by means of the telephone. That there was such an instrument in the house he knew quite well. And why did Hetty Lawrence do this thing? Was she merely frightened, or had she learnt a great deal more than the conspirators imagined?

In the garden she might have seen a great deal. She might have heard a great deal, too, as Balmayne was bound to admit. But then when she had disclosed herself in the garden her face was quite tranquil, there had been nothing on it but a certain natural surprise.

It was impossible to suspect Hetty of being an actress. The girl was too open and natural for that. And in his queer way Balmayne admired the gentle womanliness of an innocent girl.

Still, it was just as well to be on the safe side. There must be no suspicion that there had been any foul play here.

"Miss Lawrence meant well," Balmayne said, "but really there was no occasion to send for you at all. A mere accident."

Bruce bowed. He knew that he had done a foolish thing in betraying the fact that Hetty had sent for him. And her message would not have been in the nature of a prayer had not the need been urgent.

"You shall see our friend presently," Balmayne went on. "Herr Maitrank—I mean the Countess's



friend—made a late call here. I had occasion to go out after he had left and found him lying unconscious in the road. Whilst there it seemed he was robbed of certain valuables. He was so good as to suggest that it might have been here that he lost his gems—I mean his valuables.”

The fellow was lying smoothly enough, but Bruce knew that he was lying. There would be awkward explanations presently, when Hetty Lawrence came to speak ; for instance, how would it tally with the pretty story that Balmayne was bringing the unconscious form of Maitrank by the garden gate when he was found in the street ?

But already Balmayne was prepared for that. His luminous cunning brain saw the whole way clear. To save the situation a great sacrifice would have to be made. A *coup de théâtre* was necessary.

“ Perhaps it was as well that Miss Lawrence took matters in her own hands and sent for you,” he said thoughtfully. “ At any rate, your presence may get us out of a certain degree of responsibility. The patient, if I may so call him, is quieter now, and you will have no difficulty with him. Of course, that is if he will see you at all. If not you will acquit us of any discourtesy.”

Bruce bowed again. He would have given a good deal to know what the other was driving at. Was there any real meaning in the chatter, or was it all for the purpose of delay ? Bruce hinted that it was late.

“ And you want to get home,” Balmayne cried. “ Pardon me. I will go and see if they are ready for you.”

He passed out, closing the door behind him.

Then he sneezed loudly twice, and instantly Leona Lalage appeared at the head of the stairs. He flew up to her silently on the thick carpet and laid his lips to her ear.

"Dr. Bruce is here," he whispered. "That little fool of a governess of yours took it in her head to call him on the telephone. Of course, she knows nothing, but if Bruce and our friend Maitrank meet, goodness knows what will happen."

"I see, I see," the Countess replied. "If we could only scheme some plan——"

"I have a plan already arranged. It requires a great sacrifice, but you will have to make it. Give me those diamonds."

"What, the diamonds that have caused all this trouble to get. Never!"

"Give me the gems," Balmayne said doggedly. "Everything depends upon you doing what I tell you now. Besides, we shall get them back again. By sheer force of circumstances the tables have been turned in Maitrank's favour. Give me the gems!"

He spoke fiercely, with his eyes gleaming. He saw the heave of Leona's magnificent white breast, the look of anger on her face. And meanwhile the precious minutes were stealing on rapidly.

"Very well," he said, "then I shall wash my hands of the whole business. Fool, do you want to stand in the dock? And there are other dupes with not a tithe of the wit and brains of Maitrank. The gems!"

The Countess turned on her heel, and disappeared. A moment later, and she was back with the glittering stream of fire in her hand.

“There,” she whispered. “Take them. It is the bitterest moment of my life for——”

Balmayne stopped to hear no more, but hurried quickly down the stairs.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### THE WAY BLOCKED

**L**EONA LALAGE had scarcely returned to her own room when Hetty came out of hers. She had heard the loud knocking at the door, and had instantly guessed who it was. But the strange silence that followed the answering of that summons puzzled her. The whole house was wonderfully still now, a silence that seemed to tell of dark mysteries. She looked over into the hall below. She could not remain here any longer. She would go down into the library and wait there. Those two people were quite capable of murdering her lover as well as Maitrank. She opened the library door, and to her great surprise Bruce stood before her.

As she would have cried out he laid his hand on her lips. He could feel that she was trembling from head to foot.

"My darling," he whispered, "what does it all mean?"

"I cannot tell you," Hetty said helplessly. "But I have been seeing strange things all the evening. I got frightened and sent for you."

"And I am afraid I betrayed the fact," Bruce admitted. "I might have thought of some other way of accounting for my presence here. Still,

that rather piratical-looking young man seemed to think you had done right. What's this about some man picked up in the garden ? ”

“ What did Mr. Balmayne tell you ? ” Hetty asked in reply.

Bruce explained shortly. Hetty came closer to him.

“ Lies, lies, lies ! ” she whispered. “ There is not a word of truth in what he said. That old man came here because the Countess had robbed him of a lot of money. There were some diamonds that he was going to take in part payment. He had the diamonds. Then he was drugged and cleverly got out of the house. They had so managed it that a policeman saw him leave. A little further on the drug took effect. Balmayne brought the body back and carried it down the garden to the motor car waiting at the back. I saw all this ; then I had an inspiration. With my ornamental hairpin I slashed open two of the tyres of the car, so that it was impossible to take the old man away. It was too risky to carry him back to the roadway where they left him, so they had to bring him back to the house and trust to luck for the rest.”

“ And you say you saw all this ? ” Bruce asked.

“ Every bit of it. Gordon, put your ear down close to me. They were going to murder that poor old man in the garden. It took all my courage and all my nerve to appear at that moment, because they might have done me a mischief also.”

Hetty ceased to speak for a moment. The recollection of what she had gone through overcame her. Bruce kissed her tenderly.

“ But I managed it,” Hetty went on. “ When the critical moment came I was astonished at my

own calmness. They suspected nothing. I was merely out there because I had a headache and could not sleep. So I saved that man's life. It was some time after that I lost my nerve and telephoned for you."

"Are there more horrors to come, dearest?"

"No, for the time being the horrors are all over. That old man came to himself again, and swears that he has been robbed. He made an awful scene. He woke Mamie up, and I had to get her mother to come and see her. I believe Balmayne was nearly making an end of his victim when you knocked. And, oh, my dear boy, I shall be so glad to get away from this awful house."

"You shall leave it to-morrow, never to return," Bruce declared.

"No; not yet. The secret of the shadow that lies over you is bound up in this house. Till it has passed away I stay here. But it is dreadful. The silence of it frightens me. How still it all is now!"

It was very silent then. To the casual eye here was everything that the heart could desire. It seemed hard to associate vulgar crime with all this artistic beauty, with the pictures and statues and flowers.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a laugh. It was the croaking kind of laugh that could only have proceeded from the lips of an old man. But there was pleasure in it. It came strangely after the note of tragedy that had dominated the evening. A door opened somewhere, and the laugh came once more.

Then there was the voice of Balmayne in a key of mirth. The front door was opened, the call of

a cab whistle thrilled down the street. It was almost as if there were two sets of people in the house, one family given over to the dark and gloomy, the other all comedy and smiles.

On the impulse of the moment Bruce opened the library door and looked out. It was hard after what Hetty had told him to believe the evidence of his senses.

There was the man who twice within the last hour had been in danger of his life chatting quietly with the man who had robbed him. The two were evidently on the best of terms, for Maitrank was laughing heartily, and Balmayne stood opposite smoking a cigarette like a host who speeds a parting guest.

Outside was the clatter of hoofs and the jingle of harness. The hall door stood open ; Balmayne politely helped Maitrank on with his heavy coat. Hetty, standing in the background, began to wonder if she was dreaming.

“What can it all mean ?” she whispered.

Bruce could say nothing. At every turn of this mystery it seemed to grow more tangled and knotted. He waited until the two had passed into the roadway ; he heard the exchange of good-nights, and then the cab rattled away. Balmayne came back and looked quite carelessly into the library. Hetty had already stepped out of the side door and had gone up to her room. She had no desire for Balmayne to know that she had been with Bruce.

“You see our patient has gone,” Balmayne said smoothly. “As a matter of fact, the whole thing was a ridiculous mistake. But you must not blame us. The blame is due to the charming young

lady who sent for you. But that is one of the drawbacks of your noble profession. Good-night."

Bruce murmured something. He was too dazed for the moment to speak coherently.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### A CLEVER MOVE

**B**ALMAYNE'S move had been a clever one, and quite worthy of a mind like his. He recognised at once that Bruce's presence there meant danger. If Maitrank, in the excitement of the moment, chose to speak out, all the delicately-laid plans would be ruined.

He must have the diamonds back again. The old man could never have proved that they had come back once more into Leona Lalage's possession by means of a clever plan, but he was in a position now to say and do a great deal of mischief. But for the accident to the motor, things would have been different.

But there was nothing to be gained by going back. With the diamonds stuffed in his pocket, Balmayne returned to the dining-room. Maitrank sat on the sofa with his head between his hands moaning to himself. He had slipped off his heavy sable-lined overcoat, for the atmosphere of the room was oppressive.

His keen intellect had not quite come back to him, he was still suffering from the effects of the drug. He had been robbed just at the moment when

everything seemed to be going in his favour. His vanity was touched.

Balmayne picked up the coat and laid it on the table. There was just a dexterous motion and a flash of his white hands, then he smiled with the air of one who is perfectly and wholly satisfied with something.

"Are you better now?" he asked.

Maitrank looked up with a wolfish gleam in his eyes.

"I am getting to be myself again," he croaked.

"You have got the better of me this time, but it will never happen again. Ah, you are keen and you are clever, but the old wolf is ever wiser than the young one. I have been robbed."

"You are pleased to say so," Balmayne said smoothly.

"I have been robbed, I tell you. What was the trick I know not yet, but I shall find out."

"You left this house all right with the diamonds in your possession," Balmayne went on; "you cannot deny that fact. We can find a policeman who will be able to testify to the fact that you went unmolested."

Maitrank groaned. He was still more or less childish over his loss.

"Where are the diamonds?" he asked. "Tell me that, rascal!"

"Taken from you by some prowling night-bird as you lay unconscious. Which pocket did you place them in?"

"In the breast pocket of my inner coat. Bah, why argue over it?"

"You would be prepared to swear that in a court of law?"

"Well, perhaps not," Maitrank admitted. "But I had them in my possession."

"Then search once more—look everywhere. You might have changed them from one pocket to the other quite unconsciously. Be quick, because I have sent for a doctor to examine you."

"Keep the doctor to yourself," Maitrank snapped. "I'm all right. See, there is nothing in any of my pockets. My overcoat could not——"

He paused with a dazed expression as he produced from his big coat a handful of what looked like streaming fire. He gave a glad cry, the cry of a mother who has found some child that she deemed to be lost. He carried the stones to his lips and kissed them.

"I must have changed them," he sobbed. "I changed them and forgot; perhaps I had them in my hands looking at the beauties."

"Bah, you grow old, you get senile," Balmayne said contemptuously. "You have had an experience to-night that should be a warning to you. Now put it to yourself. We try to rob you—you, above all men in the world, who hold us in the hollow of your hands. Surely you pay us a very poor compliment! Our cue is to conciliate you, to find other victims to pay what we owe you and keep you silent. Once you are satisfied you will never tell—you will enjoy the sport of seeing others bitten too well. But you keep a carriage in the future and have no more fits in the street."

Maitrank grinned in sinister fashion.

"You are a clever young man; without doubt you are a very clever young man," he said. "And perhaps I have been mistaken. And I am suspicious; I have good cause to be. One reads in

books of honest men who are the souls of integrity. Ah! But then I have never met with such a one in business."

"And touching this doctor?" Balmayne asked.

"Go along with your doctor," said Maitrank now, in great good humour. "If you will have the goodness to call a cab I will get back to my hotel."

But Bruce knew nothing of this change of things. He was utterly puzzled. As he walked home he could make nothing of it. Hetty's story was too circumstantial to be anything but absolutely true. There must have been some strong reason for this change of part. Perhaps Lawrence could throw some light on it. He might even know the man Maitrank. At any rate he was on very friendly terms with Isaac Isidore, who would be sure to have the names of all the European capitalists at his fingers' ends.

Bruce put the whole thing resolutely out of his mind, and went to bed. It was not till after luncheon that he found time to see Lawrence, to whom he told Hetty's story and the strange scene he had witnessed the night before.

"This is a complication," Lawrence said, as he puffed at his cigarette thoughtfully. "It has no part in the original scheme for your destruction, which was founded on my lost skeleton novel. There is no doubt in my mind now that the Countess has made up her mind to get you under her thumb. So far I can follow her—indeed, I have followed her in a fashion that would startle that lady if she knew everything. But people of that kind have many irons in the fire, and what you tell me looks like one that has nearly burnt her fingers. Our

game is to sift the incident, and try and turn it to advantage. I am going to show you some pretty sport presently connected with those diamonds. Also I am going to use them so that we shall get Maitrank on our side."

"I wish I was as sanguine as you are," said Bruce.

"I'm more," said Lawrence. "I'm certain I have gathered up pretty well all the cards by this time. Now you put on your hat and come with me. I'm going to have a few words with Isaac Isidore."

## CHAPTER XXXV

### A POWERFUL ALLY

**I**SAAC ISIDORE was lunching at his chambers in his own simple way. A hard trying life like his, to say nothing of half his nights spent in society, called for a careful régime. Plain food and a total absence from intoxicants enabled the man to get through an enormous amount of work and pleasure.

He was glad to see Lawrence as usual. Had he not preferred the atmosphere of finance, Isidore would have made a fine novelist of the sensational order. His fine imagination enabled him to bring off so many of the surprises with which he constantly terrified his brother capitalists.

"Anything to do with the mystery?" he asked.

"I should say a great deal," Lawrence chuckled.

"In the first place, I should like to hear something of the history of one Maitrank."

"You don't mean to say he's in it!" Isidore cried, grimly amused. "The cunningest fox in all Europe. Truly the Lalage is a wonderful woman! But I see our friend Dr. Bruce is burning to tell me a story. Pray go on."

Bruce proceeded to relate all that had happened the previous evening. Isidore shook with sup-

pressed laughter, though he never spoke a word. The narrator quite failed himself to see the humorous side of the matter.

"What do you think of it?" Lawrence asked at length.

"I think that but for the pluck and courage of a girl friend Maitrank would have gone to his account before now," Isidore said more seriously. "I must confess that I find the mystery of it all exceedingly fascinating. Maitrank is not the kind of man who forgets and forgives in a moment. What on earth could have induced him to grow so friendly with that fellow Balmayne all at once?"

"That I leave you to guess," Bruce replied. "It is beyond me."

"But it is not in the least beyond me," Lawrence remarked coolly, as he reached for a cigarette. "To a certain extent I hold the key to the situation. Accident strengthens my hands, as it generally does in dealing with people of this kind. And I am going to make a powerful new ally in this new business. I need not ask you if you are personally acquainted with Maitrank, Isidore?"

"Oh, I know the man well enough," Isidore replied. "I will give you an introduction to him right enough. But you won't get much from that quarter."

Lawrence begged to differ. In the first place, he anticipated considerable entertainment. He was not selfish, he said, and had no desire to keep it to himself.

"You must have your comic relief to every drama," he said. "We haven't had much humour up to now, but that is coming. By the way, I hope your Continental friend is not subject to apoplexy?"

Lawrence chuckled to himself with the air of a man who has a joke which is too good for the world in general. Isidore was puzzled and interested.

"Tell you what," he exclaimed, "I'll try and get Maitrank on the telephone. He has a sort of office at the Metropole."

It was a little before five when the trio reached the Metropole. A suite of rooms had been chartered by the Hungarian capitalist, and there he had already established a secretary and a clerk or two to look after his affairs. He was seated in his shirt-sleeves, with a big black cigar in his mouth, when his visitors entered. He extended two fingers to Isidore, to the others he merely bowed.

"And what can I do for you?" he asked.

"You might be disposed to answer a few questions," said Bruce, quietly. "I was the doctor who was called in to see you last night. But for the courage of a young girl, I might to-day have given evidence at the inquest held on the body of a most distinguished capitalist called Maitrank."

Lawrence nodded approvingly. Bruce had struck the right note.

"I should like to hear more of this," Maitrank cried.

Bruce plunged into his story. He had a most interested listener. The small grey eyes of the listener were fixed intently on the narrator's face. The black cigar died out between his fingers.

He had no questions to ask; there was no doubt on his face. If ever a man was telling the simple truth it was Bruce at that moment. There was something like a smile on Maitrank's face when Bruce came to the part that Hetty had played in the stirring drama of the previous night.



"I never forget a favour," said Maitrank, hoarsely. "The young lady shall have a very practical evidence of my gratitude. She saved my life, and she ended up by getting my property returned to me."

"I don't want to pry into your affairs," said Lawrence. "But would you mind telling me one thing? The Countess owes you money?"

"Well, yesterday she owed me nearly £100,000. I have got part of that back in the way of the jewels, hence my change of attitude last night. By a clever trick, that woman robbed me of a fortune. When I found it out I said nothing. It was no cue of mine to make a fuss about it. If I had done so I should have lost everything. So I came to England. By way of a start I obtained possession of diamonds to the value of some £30,000."

"You are quite certain of that?" Lawrence asked, meaningly.

"My dear sir, they are in my possession. If you are still cynical on the point I will show them to you."

Lawrence desired nothing better. In a few minutes the stones lay on the table. The novelist picked them up, and took from his pocket a small file which he coolly rubbed on the facet of two of the larger stones. Maitrank smiled. Any diamond would stand that test. With a grave look, Lawrence handed the stones back—the tested diamonds were dull and flat.

"Paste!" Maitrank cried, with a yell that rang through the building. "Paste, as I am a sinner. Deluded and fooled again. Rich as I am I would sacrifice every penny to be even with that woman."

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### A FAINT CLUE

**I**T was a day or two later before Lawrence saw Prout again. In the meantime he had not been idle. In some vague way or another he felt sure he was on the track of the Corner House mystery. A dozen theories were formed and abandoned. If Prout had only possessed Lawrence's imagination !

"But is there anything in the letters?" the latter asked after Prout had given him a precis of their contents. "Something we can go by?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," Prout admitted. "The only thing I have established so far is that my prisoner is the brother of the murdered man. Oddly enough, he has no idea that the writer of those letters is dead. And as he declines to disclose his own name, we cannot discover the identity of his murdered brother."

Lawrence read over the letters carefully, there was less here than he expected. They were all full of vague schemes of making money by various shady ways, and all bewailed the fact that the writer could not obtain the necessary capital to start. Really the letters were hardly worth reading.

But patience is generally rewarded. Here was a hiatus after a series of regular dates. The writer had been drinking heavily, somebody had got hold of him, and was detaining him somewhere against his will. He was not allowed to say where he was. His last letter of the series hinted at a possibility of large sums of money.

"I'm afraid it's no good, sir," said Prout when Lawrence had finished.

"I don't quite agree with you," Lawrence said. "The man was detained against his will. Where was he detained? In the Corner House? Because his gaoler was afraid of his discretion. Now go a step further and ask who detained him yonder. You can answer that question for yourself."

"Countess Lalage," Prout muttered. "But why?"

"Ah, that is the point. Get to that, and the problem is solved. Now listen to me, Prout. The rascal who wrote those letters and the rascal who received them were brothers. They were fond of each other, which you will admit is possible. I see that for some reason of your own you have concealed the fact from the prisoner that his brother is no more. If you tell him the truth he will probably make some startling admission."

Prout nodded admiringly. Lawrence took a photograph from his pocket.

"Tell him the news abruptly," he said. "And when the man has digested that, show him the photograph. It is a recent one of Countess Lalage. I want to know if he recognises her."

Prout departed on his errand. It was easy enough for him to obtain a private interview with the prisoner, who received him with polite mockery.

His instinct told him that Prout wished to learn something.

"You are welcome;" he said; "it is so dull here that even the conversation of a mere detective is pleasing."

"The detective was sharp enough to get you here," Prout said.

"Ah, well, even the great Napoleon made a mistake or two."

"Which you are likely to do yourself," said Prout, "if you try to be too smart. I want you to answer me a few questions, which don't affect your case at all. Give me the desired information, and I'll make matters as easy as I can for you on your trial. I can't get you off, but I can lighten the case."

The other man nodded. Prout was talking sense now.

"Go on, mon brave," he said. "I will do what I can for you—and myself."

"It's about those letters I found in your possession," Prout said, "the letters to you from your brother. I know they are from your brother, because I have seen him, and also his handwriting. You need not be afraid of him, because he is far beyond being injured by any one in the world."

"Say," the other whispered fiercely. "Poor Leon—is he dead?"

Prout nodded. It was some little time before the other spoke. His next question startled the detective.

"Was he murdered?" came the hoarse whisper.

"He was. You didn't know he was dead, yet you guessed how he died. He was the victim of what you call the Corner House——"

"Ah, I remember now. I was too busy to read, but I heard people speaking about it. My poor brother, my poor Leon."

"Leon—?"

"Leon Lalage."

"Your brother's name was Leon Lalage?" Prout asked.

"That is so, and my name is René. To think we were once happy boys together on my mother's flower farm in Corsica!"

René Lalage bowed his head and wept after the manner of his nation. He had offered Prout a far more valuable clue than he had expected. All sorts of possibilities were opening out before the eyes of the detective.

"I am interested in getting at the truth about your brother's death," he said. "That is why I am here to-day. Before you knew how he came by his death you asked me if your brother had been murdered. Why?"

"Because there was one who hated him. I cannot and will not say any more than that. He stood in the way of somebody. So long as he kept away it was all right. But Leon was not one of that sort. He was as brave as a lion. Had he not been so fond of the drink he might have done anything. But there was something in the blood of both of us that took us into evil ways. Thank God our mother is dead, the flower farm gone, and the secret of the wonderful perfume that made the name of Lalage famous for two centuries is buried in my mother's grave."

"One more question and I have done," said Prout. "Your brother had some one to fear. Now was that some one a man or a woman?"

"A woman. I can't say more than that."

Prout was fairly satisfied. He produced a photo that Lawrence had given him.

"Is that the woman by any chance?" he asked.

René Lalage thought not. All the same, he seemed puzzled. But he could not be definite, and Prout was fain to be content.

"This seems to be a great lady," the prisoner said. "She conveys nothing to me except as to her eyes. No, it is not possible. And she would not be in English costume. Some years ago she was in England playing at one of the theatres or music halls. There was a fine picture of her in one of the papers—Lalage, the dancer."

Prout felt that he was getting on.

"Can you tell me the name of the paper?" he asked.

René Lalage confessed himself puzzled. Compatriots had shown him the paper, but he had forgotten. There was a headpiece to the paper with a woman on it blowing a trumpet. It seemed to be all actors and the like.

"It has gone from my mind," he said. "It is so long ago. Even then my brother and this woman had drifted apart. I am not happy in my mind to-day, for your news has disturbed me more than I can tell. Even a rascal like myself can be possessed of a heart, eh?"

"If I come again can you refresh your memory?"

"It is possible. It is not for me to say. Only poor Leon must be avenged!"

The speaker clutched Prout passionately by

the arm. His whole frame was quivering with passion.

"The vengeance comes closer," said Prout ;  
"it is closer than you imagine. And I fancy that  
your evidence will hang the murderer."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### THE TALK OF THE TOWN

LAWRENCE was profoundly interested in what Prout had to say. The latter had given far more information than he had imagined.

"You have given me some valuable clues," he said. "In the first place we now know the real name of the murdered man. Strange that it should be the same as the fascinating Countess! And stranger still that our brilliant adventuress did not call herself something else when she engineered herself into society. But probably that is part of the reckless audacity of her nature. It was very foolish, because it jogs up the brains of a man like myself who has knocked about artistic and theatrical London for so long. And I distinctly recollect a Lalage, a dancer, who made a hit at the halls some seven or eight years ago."

"And whose portrait appeared in one of the smart papers," said Prout. "I wonder if you can remember the name of the paper. It may be alive or it may be dead, but the ornamental heading had a woman playing a trumpet on it. This is in your line, sir, far more than in mine."

Lawrence cogitated over the matter. Eight



years ago his position had been very different to what it was now. Then he had to be eager and alert, to study every journal that published fiction. In those days he had had the whole list at his finger ends. His face suddenly lightened.

"I've got it," he cried. "The paper was called the *Talk of the Town*. It was a sort of pioneer to the *Sketch*, but of a lower type. For a time it had a great vogue, but a prosecution for libel killed it. If it is possible to see a file——"

"That's easy," Prout put in. "You'll get a file right enough, and in all probability be in a position to purchase the copy you want. Frampton's in Holborn make it a business to stock all papers and back numbers, charging a shilling for a penny paper and so on. They've got millions of moribund journals."

Lawrence remarked that he would make it his business to step round to Frampton's without delay. It was just possible that he had not squeezed all the information that he wanted out of Prout.

"Did you find out anything about the past of those fellows?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't, sir," Prout replied. The poor fellow seemed so cut up over the death of his brother. Very sentimental, those foreigners. He kept talking of the days when they were together on the flower farm in Corsica. They come of a pretty good stock, for my man spoke of a scent that their family had made for two centuries, the secret of which was buried with——"

"What!" Lawrence shouted. "What! Say that again."

"I hope there is nothing wrong, sir," asked Prout.

"Wrong?" Lawrence cried as he paced the room. "Not much. Why, you are giving me the master key to the situation. Look me up again this evening. I guess I shall be able to astonish you. I'm off to Frampton's now. I must have a copy of that paper if it costs me a hundred pounds."

Frampton's establishment consisted merely of cellars where grimy men seemed to be busy with piles of journals. After a little trouble and a reference or two to a ponderous ledger a pile of the *Talk of the Town* was produced. There were not more than two hundred altogether, but Lawrence had the satisfaction of knowing that they were complete. Some of them were duplicated many times.

At the end of an hour Lawrence found what he wanted. Here was the portrait of a striking woman in Spanish costume, her eyes were dark, her hair wonderfully fair. Lawrence's hands trembled a little as he folded up the paper.

"And what do you want for this?" he asked.

Frampton incidentally replied that half a crown was the price. It would have been cheap to the purchaser at a thousand times the money. It was a little later that Bruce came round to the novelist's rooms in response to an urgent telephone message. He looked pale and anxious; he was fighting hard, but he found that the odds were terribly against him.

"Have you made any new discoveries?" he asked.

"I flatter myself I have," said Lawrence. "Here is a copy of a paper now extinct called the *Talk of the Town*. On the front page is a photo of a Spanish dancer. Behold she is called Lalage, the

Spanish premiere. Look and see if you have ever seen her before."

"Lalage," Bruce cried. "The Spanish—and the same name! Why, that is the same woman who received me on that fatal night at the corner house!"

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### MAITRANK STRIKES

**M**EANWHILE the brilliant society season was drawing to a close. Few smart functions remained, but there would be no more dashing affair than the forthcoming ball at Lytton Avenue. The supper was coming from Paris, the decorations were unique, the flowers were to cost upwards of a thousand pounds. The society papers had more or less veracious paragraphs, a score of lady journalists were making copy of the affair.

Thus Maitrank chuckled over his invitation. He was going to take his vengeance for the trick played on him in his own good time. He had purposely kept out of the way of the Countess. He set the cables in motion, and after a due response or two he was closeted with the head of a smart firm of lawyers in Ely Place. •

"You are quite sure of my position?" he croaked.

"Quite, sir," the lawyer responded. "According to the papers drawn up at the time, you can take possession and demand your money at any moment. You are in the same position as a landlord distraining for rent. If you want us to act——"

"I do," Maitrank snapped. "I wish you to

act at eleven o'clock to-morrow night. No need to stare at me like that, sir. I know what I am doing. And I am prepared to pay you handsomely for your services."

The lawyer bowed his strange client out. He had only to obey instructions. He went back to his desk pondering on the sensation that society was going to get shortly. Maitrank went straight away to Lawrence.

"I have done what you asked," he said curtly. "You are a wonderful man, you novelist; see you at our dear friend the Countess's to-morrow. Good night."

By the time that Maitrank had bowed with humility over the hand of his hostess the following evening nearly all fashionable London had gathered in those spacious suites of rooms. The decorations were superb, unique; there was no better music to be obtained in Europe. Folk were talking with bated breath of the great chef who had come from Paris to superintend his supper.

It was the crowning glory of a wonderful woman's career. She stood smiling before her guests in a dress that had cost Worth a sleepless night. A duke was just congratulating her upon her good taste. A couple of gorgeous footmen were casting back the curtains of the supper room. Down below in the hall something like an altercation seemed to be going on.

"It's a man, my lady," a blushing footman stammered. "He declines to go away. I called in a policeman, and he showed him a paper, after which the police went, saying it seemed all right and legal or something like that. The fellow says he must see you."

Perhaps a creditor beyond all patience and in desperate need of money. Leona Lalage sailed out of the room into the hall, where two seedy-looking men awaited her.

"Well, what is it you want to-night?" she demanded, haughtily.

A long slip of paper was thrust into her hand. Her quick brain grasped the significance. Maitrand had struck, and struck hard. These men were in possession for nearly £100,000—vulgar bailiffs such as come and sell the goods of poor people who cannot pay their rent. Leona Lalage remembered now the conditions under which she had borrowed money from Maitrank. He had her in his power. It seemed a vile thing to do when she had put him off with the very jewels from about her neck. And she was powerless—she could not have these men turned into the street. Most of her guests would understand sooner or later. To-morrow this would be public property. Once the tongue of rumour started the crash was bound to follow.

Leona Lalage looked round her helplessly for the first time in her life. Maitrank stood there grinning like a hideous mask enjoying her confusion. He had come to enjoy this where a more sensitive man would have stayed away. Revenge to him was nothing unless he could feast his eyes upon it.

"You scoundrel, you cur!" she hissed. "If I had a weapon in my hand, I would kill you and die happy. Why have you done this thing?"

"Why do you foist me off with paste jewels?" Maitrank asked, coolly. "Ah you may stare with amazement! You are a very clever actress, madam."

"Paste?" Lalage gasped. "Paste! Why for their sake—impossible!"

"I will sell them to you for the price of your bouquet," said Maitrank. "It is my turn now. Won't you have your guests in to supper?"

The Countess looked round her helplessly. The sound of the music, the ripple of laughter, the murmur of voices maddened her. She knew that the crash must come some time, but she had not dreamt of a humiliation like this. Lawrence came sauntering down the steps. She flew to him.

Could he help her. She was in great trouble, and she knew that she could trust him. She owed Maitrank a lot of money; he had chosen to humiliate her by actually putting these vulgar bailiffs in to-night, of all times. Those pleading eyes would have melted a heart of stone. Lawrence seemed to be greatly distressed.

"I fancy I can see a way out of the difficulty," he said. "I do not wish to pry into your affairs, but in a novelist's business one gets to know things. And I, too, am in a great quandary. Do you recollect the flower farm near Ajaccio?"

"I am going mad," Leona whispered. "To allude to that to-night! Well, I have got on in the world like other people. No need to allude to that. What can it possibly have to do with the matter?"

"One never knows," said Lawrence. "But I see you remember. You also remember the marvellous secret of the tuberose scent. For my own purposes I require a little of it, my story demands it. I am talking business now. Give me the little bottle from the Antoinette cabinet in your boudoir, and I will get rid of those men for you."

Slowly Leona Lalage took the speaker in from head to foot. Her face had grown deadly pale. But she could make nothing of Lawrence's face. All the same, it was quite evident that he meant every word that he said.

"You shall have it," she said suddenly. "How you got to know so much of my history you shall tell me presently. But the tuberose is yours."

She flashed along the hall. Directly she was gone Lawrence signalled to Maitrank, who stood in the background. The latter produced a letter which he handed to the foremost of the two intruders.

"As you see, this is from the solicitor who employs you," he said. "If I like to change my mind, and ask you to go you are to obey. I ask you to go. Say nothing of this, and I will see you are suitably rewarded in the morning."

The man looked and nodded. He winked at his companion, and together they strode out of the house. With a silent laugh Maitrank crept up the stairs.

"I trust you," he croaked. "You promised me a better vengeance than I could get for myself. See that I get it."

"More for the sake of others you shall get it," Lawrence cried. "It's flattering to the vanity of a novelist to have a millionaire for one of his puppets."

The Countess came sweeping back again with one tiny phial in her hand. Lawrence did not need to look to see that it was the right one. Unknown to the Countess, he had had it in his possession before.

"There!" she cried. "And now to keep your



part of the compact. If you have got round Maitrank you are a genius. Where are the men ? ”

“ Gone ! ” said Lawrencé. “ I waved my hand and they have departed. Nobody but us three has any knowledge of the truth.”

A quiet sigh escaped from the listener. She smiled again.

“ It is a debt I can never repay,” she said. “ Will you stay after the others have gone and tell me how you learnt my early history ? ”

“ That is just what I should like to do,” Lawrence said coolly.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### LAWRENCE SHOWS HIS HAND

THE last guest had departed, the strains of music had died away. The lights were out, and the flowers were wilting on the walls. Leona Lalage had discarded her dress for a fascinating wrap, and was seated in her boudoir making a cigarette and trying to read something from the expression of Lawrence's face.

"And now what does it all mean?" she asked gaily. "In the first place, tell me how you got your influence over Maitrank."

"Knowledge is power," said Lawrence, "so long as you keep it to yourself. Why did you tell me that you had never heard of the tuberose perfume?"

"That is easy. I had no desire to speak of my humble past. I was brought up near that flower farm where Mme. Lalage made that marvellous perfume. I am passionately fond of it, the more so that you cannot get it now. I use it sometimes in the evening after the others have gone to bed. But how did you know——"

"Never mind that. Years ago I got a whiff of it in Vienna, and it appealed to my imagination. I saw a way of bringing it into fiction, much as it

was done in the case of the play called 'Dora.' I am going to do so."

"But how did you know that I had it?"

"I noticed it one night, very faintly I admit, but there it was. You denied the fact to me, and I had to force your hand. It sounds very clever, but commonplace enough when you once see how the trick is done."

The Countess stirred uneasily in her chair. She felt there was more to follow.

"I have to my hand," Lawrence went on, "the materials for a magnificent romance. Let us go back a little while. Some week or two ago here we discussed the Corner House. I said it would make the scene of a capital romance. I went further and said I had already sketched the story out. You recollect that?"

The Countess nodded. Her lips were narrow and drawn in tightly.

"Strange to say," Lawrence proceeded, "almost immediately there was a tragedy at the Corner House, just on the lines of my story—the story that I said I should probably never write. Now that was very strange."

"Very strange indeed," the Countess said hoarsely.

"The more I thought it over the more certain I became that my brain had been picked, and that my plot was being used by some designing person to bring trouble and disgrace upon a man who is destined to be related to me. I waited for a little time to see how matters were developing, and then decided to refresh my memory from the skeleton plot of that unwritten story. When I looked in my desk I could not find the plot. Why? Because it had been stolen.

"I was quite certain of the fact when I looked for it. And all the time this Corner House tragedy was being enacted exactly as I should have written it. There were other complications, of course, but the plot was the same."

"It sounds incredible," the Countess said.

"Not to me," Lawrence replied meaningly. "The person who stole my plot did not know that I had it thoroughly by heart. And when my young friend Bruce went to the Corner House and got into all that trouble, I was in a position beforehand to tell him all that had happened. The scheme over those notes was also mine. I know perfectly well how the whole thing was worked so as to make an innocent man appear guilty. I knew before I heard Bruce's story all about the old German and the picture.

"Perhaps you knew also the culprit," the Countess suggested.

Lawrence did not appear to hear the question, so he proceeded.

"There were other notes as well mentioned in that fateful letter. But what had become of the other notes? Nobody seemed to know or care about that. But the numbers were known, and strangely enough, eventually they turned up in this very house. They were paid over the gambling table that night that Isidore gave a cheque to the Marchioness. The question is, who paid those notes over, who was it who first brought them into the room that night?"

"A question that can never be solved," the Countess gasped.

"You are mistaken," Lawrence said quietly, "I have handled those notes, and I have solved

the problem. They were produced in the first instance by you."

Leona Lalage was on her feet in a moment. Her face was pale as ashes.

"You are wrong," she cried. "It could not have been so."

"It was so, because of the scent of them. Every one of these notes was—and is—very slightly impregnated with the smell of tuberose."

There was a long, long silence, a silence that could be felt.

## CHAPTER XL

### ANOTHER COIL

LAWRENCE stretched out his hand for a cigarette as if he had said the most natural thing in the world. A less clever man would have shown something like triumph. But Lawrence had thought this all out as carefully as if it were really a new melodrama he was writing. The time had come when matters must be forced into the channel to suit himself. Already he had laid the lines carefully.

This woman must be made to own that the missing notes had really come from her, or at least part of them. Once this was done, the novelist felt pretty sure of his game. But though he wanted to startle and alarm his companion, he didn't desire to expose his suspicions too far.

"A very singular circumstance, is it not?" he asked, quietly.

Leona Lalage had recovered herself; she did not know that Lawrence had been purposely busy over his cigarette to give her an opportunity of so doing.

"Really, I ought to be indignant," she cried.

"Surely not," Lawrence murmured quietly.

"I have made no accusations. In taking up the

matter on behalf of Gordon Bruce, I have to make searching inquiries. I naturally ask myself where are the rest of those notes. By a strange fate they turn up here. Isidore identifies the numbers and I identify the scent. I am more or less able to prove that it was you who produced those notes the night of the card party. You went to your room to get some cash which you changed into gold. Therefore the notes were in your possession."

"But I'll swear to you," the Countess broke in vehemently. "I'll swear——"

"My dear friend, there is no occasion to do anything of the kind. Am I making any kind of accusation against you? Ridiculous! Why, black as things look against my friend Bruce, I don't suspect him. All I want you to do is to try and recollect whence you got those notes."

Leona Lalage kept her face half hidden behind her fan. For the life of her she could not tell whether this man was playing with her or not. Hitherto men had been her puppets, hitherto she had regarded all of them as fools. Lawrence smoked calmly on, as if he were discussing the weather or something equally exciting.

"I'll try," she said, "but then I handle so much money. I play cards, I bet on horses. There are scores of ways. But I'll try."

Lawrence rose and took his leave. He dropped in at the nearest telephone call office and late as it was rang up Isidore. The latter was waiting.

"It's all right," he said. "I have had Balmayne here as you suggested. And I have told him exactly as much as you desired him to know. He's just gone off in a great hurry, for any money to Lytton Avenue."

As a matter of fact, Balmayne's cab passed Lawrence a minute or two later. The latter smiled as if well pleased with himself.

"Splendid so far," he murmured. "She'll walk into the trap, in fact they both will. And now I think I have really earned a good night's rest."

Leona Lalage was raging up and down the room as Balmayne entered. The first saffron streaks of dawn were making the electrics thin and yellow. Evidently something had gone wrong. Balmayne waited for his companion to speak.

"I came here with pretty bad news," he said, after a pause. "I went off with Isidore to talk business, and he let out something that absolutely startled me."

"It can't be as bad as my news," Leona said, gloomily. "They have traced the rest of the missing notes directly to my possession."

"What!" Balmayne cried, "were you mad enough to——"

"I am afraid so. It is no time for idle recrimination. The gambling fever was on me the other night and I felt that I must play. I tried to borrow money that evening, but not one of the wretches would trust me with a shilling. I had those notes upstairs; they formed my rescue in case of a collapse. It seemed to me that nobody would be any the wiser. I brought them down, and gambled with them. And beyond all doubt, Gilbert Lawrence has traced them to me."

"Will you be so good as to tell me how?" Balmayne said.

In a few words the story was told. Balmayne listened moodily. With his further knowledge of facts he saw the danger.



"This is dreadful," he said. "The man who died in the Corner House changed four hundred sovereigns into notes. Part of them he put into a letter to send to a certain person who appears to have been nameless. We know that he was going to send that money to his brother."

"Of course. But, thank goodness, we are the only people who know that."

"Exactly where you are mistaken," said Balmayne, bitterly. "They all know it. Isidore let it out to-night. The fellow Prout, who has the Corner House case in hand, by a piece of amazing luck has arrested a criminal on another charge. In that criminal's possession were certain letters addressed to him by the—by Leona Lalage, in fact. In other words the police have discovered the dead man's brother René!"

The Countess paused in her agitated walk. She had been striding up and down the room impatiently. She paused now with her hand to her head as if somebody had shot her in her stride, and collapsed into a chair.

"Say that again," she groaned, "say that again."

"My words were perfectly plain," Balmayne said, impatiently. "René Lalage is in the hands of the police; they know he is brother to the murdered man by certain letters found in his possession. Also we know that in their queer way those two rascals were very fond of one another. There is not much suspicion yet, or Isidore would not have told me so much to-night. But when ill-luck begins to dog one, it is amazing how far that ill-luck goes. For instance——"

"Well? Go on, nothing could be worse than what has happened."

"Oh, can't it? It only wants Garrett Charlton to turn up now. We must get those notes from Isidore at any hazard. They will remain in his possession—in fact, he told me to-night that he had them. He said——"

But the Countess did not heed. Absolutely worn out in mind and body she had fainted.

## CHAPTER XLI

### PROUT IS INDISCREET

**H**EAVY as were these blows, a few hours' sleep braced Leona Lalage for what she knew to be a trying ordeal. By the time that breakfast was a thing of the past she had sketched out a new plan of campaign. The terrible unseen force from behind had driven her from her strong position. In future she would have to recognize the fact that she was hopelessly beaten, and all that she could expect now was to cover up her tracks and prevent the final solution of the mystery.

On the whole, an appearance of candour would be best. She would go straight to Prout, who had the Corner House tragedy in hand, and tell him everything, at least everything that Lawrence had found out. She never guessed for a moment that this was exactly what the novelist expected her to do, in fact, he had apparently told all he knew to gain this end. Also, at his suggestion, Isidore had blurted out the fact that Prout had succeeded in laying Leon Lalage's brother by the heels.

On the whole, this would be by far the best thing to do. It was just possible that her fascinations might elicit something further from Prout. Leona

Lalage might not have felt quite so easy in her mind had she known that the little snake-headed detective was fresh from a long interview with Lawrence.

He was profoundly impressed by the graciousness of his visitor. He even dusted an office chair for her with a clean handkerchief. He seemed a simple sort of man. Leona Lalage had not a high opinion of the police.

"I have come to have a chat with you," she said with her most brilliant smile, "on the subject of the Corner House. They tell me you have made an arrest that by a wonderful chance will have an important bearing on the case."

Prout grew wooden. His official manner caused Leona to hide a smile. Really, it would be child's play to get the better of this man.

"I am afraid you are mistaken, madame," he said.

"Indeed, no. Mr. Isidore spoke of it quite freely. It appears that a brother of the dead man has come into your hands. Is not that so?"

Prout grudgingly admitted that it was. He was also severe on the indiscretion of certain people. Mr. Isidore ought to know better. The Countess was charmed. Evidently she was going to do exactly as she pleased with this man. Every question that she asked him he contrived to answer in some way that betrayed his knowledge.

"Not that I am asking for sheer curiosity," she said gaily. "You see I am also in a position to throw a little light in a dark place. Do you know that the rest of the missing notes have been in my possession?"

Prout was surprised. Not that he ought to have

been surprised after the strange things that had come in his way professionally. The way he conveyed the impression that all this was news to him was artistic. He asked a score of questions, he made voluminous notes solemnly in a large book.

"You have really been of great service to me, madame," he said. "It was very good of you to come and tell me straightforwardly. Now, let us see if we can trace these notes to the possession of the previous holder."

Leona Lalage intimated that was the only thing she desired for the moment. But at the same time she made it pretty clear to Prout that the thing was impossible. Her keen desire was to show him the impossibility of the proceeding, and induce him to give up any further investigations in that direction.

"You see, I have the good fortune to be exceedingly rich," she said, with her most fascinating smile. "I don't value money as much as I should. To me it is a mere medium for enjoyment. I gamble, and bet, and all that kind of thing, in fact I generally have a large sum of money in paper in the house. I might have got those notes from a betting man at Ascot, or at Goodwood, or even the card table. But at the same time I'll try my best to assist you."

Prout was profuse. He was very anxious over those notes. He had certainly had the good fortune to take into custody one René Lalage, the brother to Leon Lalage, who had been murdered in the Corner House.

"Strange they should be the same name as myself," the Countess said.

"Not in the least," Prout hastened to reply.

"I find the name is a very common one at Marseilles, and along the Mediterranean generally."

The Countess smiled. She had risen prepared to take her departure. If she had any knowledge of faces she had made a good impression.

"It seems hardly credible," she said. "I mean the story of the Corner House as told by Dr. Bruce. That Spanish woman, for instance."

Prout shook his head in a non-committal fashion. He had heard some amazing statements made by suspects in his time, statements so wild that they carried guilt on the face of them. And yet he had personally proved many of these statements to be true. The Countess smiled as she turned to the door.

"I am not very easily impressed," she said, "and as to that Spanish woman—eh, Dr. Bruce must have been taking lessons from Mr. Lawrence."

"The woman did exist all the same," Prout said innocently. "In fact, I don't mind admitting that I've got a portrait——"

He paused and looked down. The smile faded from Leona's face.

"Who told you that it was a portrait of—I mean where did you——"

"René Lalage. As you are interested, and as you came here to assist me, madame, I don't mind going so far as to show you the picture. It came from a weekly paper——"

"I know—I mean, what do I mean?" the Countess said hoarsely. "Really I don't know why I should be so interested."

Prout took a sheet of paper from his desk and held it up. It was a portrait of a fair Spanish gipsy. The letterpress and border had been cut away.

"What do you think of that?" Prout asked.

Leona Lalage said nothing. She could only look and look in a fascinated way

"It—it proves nothing," she said with an effort, presently. "A pleasant face. Don't you think that she is a little like me?"

## CHAPTER XLII

### FEAR !

**L**EONA LALAGE held herself up talking bravely about the weather, whilst Prout was dumb with admiration of her audacity. Her very recklessness inspired his respect. He little knew of the deadly fear and suffering concealed behind that smiling mask. The last thing he saw as he closed the door of the brougham was an averted face and a small hand.

The blood horses dashed on, whilst Leona Lalage lay back against the cushions and fainted for the third time in her life. It had been a wonderful effort to put the deadly feeling off so long, but her iron will had conquered.

She came to herself again with a shudder and a feeling of anguish in every limb. She was not suspected yet, or even a fool of an English detective would not have shown her that picture. Broken and agitated as she was, her quick brain began to work again.

In the first place she must get those notes back from Isidore. Even if they had to be obtained by force it must be done. She took a visiting card from her case, and in as steady a hand as possible



pencilled a line or two on the back asking Isidore to come round and dine with her that evening. Once this was done and left at the capitalist's rooms she felt a little easier in her mind. She was doing something.

Hence she drove on to the Metropole with the hope of seeing Maitrank. She had to wait there till she was angry and impatient. Hitherto she had not had to wait. She was going to get to the bottom of that diamond business if she had to stay all day. A stolid clerk came out and said Herr Maitrank was disengaged.

Maitrank, in his shirt-sleeves, was smoking one of his black cigars. He made no apology for his attire nor for the rank tobacco between his yellow teeth. How different the last time when they had met in the millionaire's office.

"Why did you keep me waiting so long?" the Countess demanded.

Maitrank chuckled. He admired a fighter, and here was one to his hand. It was pretty audacious in a woman who had swindled him out of a fortune.

"I was merely deferring the pleasure, my dear," he said. "What can I do for you? Any fresh loan on the banks of the clouds or castles in the air or anything of that kind? Or do you wish to sell me any diamonds?"

"I swear to you," the Countess said, "that I was innocent over those diamonds. I honestly believed them to be genuine, and worth far more money than the sum for which I parted with them. I feel now that I have been tricked. You old wolf, you had the real stones taken away for some purpose of your own."

She bent over the table and shook her clenched

hand angrily in the old man's face. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Gently, gently," he growled. "Let us look at those gems. I have them here. See, are those the ones you passed over to me?"

He pitched the glittering gauds contemptuously on the desk. Leona examined them carefully. So far as she could see no change had been made. And where the stones had been filed she could see the dull scratched edges. Was this the work of the hidden enemy or another cruel stroke of ill fortune?

"They look like the same," she admitted grudgingly. "I'm afraid you're right there."

"Take them back to the place where you purloined them," Maitrank grinned.

Leona was silent. Whence the gems came was no business of her opponent. He seemed to be pleased about something. And he made no allusion to his money, which was a very bad sign. The Countess brought up the subject.

"What are you going to do?" she asked meaningfully.

"I am going to do nothing—for the present," Maitrank replied. "I am going to pursue what that admirable diplomatist Beaconsfield called a policy of masterly inactivity. If I do not get my money in cash I shall in another way."

"But you are going to get it?" Leona said eagerly. "I have practically effected a loan with the firm of Ernstein of New York—why do you laugh?"

"Because I am amused, because I am greatly amused. You are wasting your time and all your pretty schemes there. The name of a firm means nothing in business nowadays. I have a different name in every capital in Europe. Also I have

another different name in New York. For instance, my firm is called Ernstein and Co., of 149, Broadway. Ah, ah ! ”

“ So I have been corresponding with you all the time ? ”

“ Yes. As the English say, that is about the size of it. Those letters of yours ! Oh, oh ! The fun I have had out of this. And the magnificent lies ! ”

But Maitrank was alone. The Countess had bounced in a fury out of the room. At every turn fate seemed to be against her now.

That deadly fear was coming on her again. It was hard to be baffled and beaten at every turn like this, and yet not be able to strike a single blow in return. There was the haunting terror that her enemies knew too much, and that the sword would fall when they pleased. Otherwise the cruel, greedy nature of Maitrank would never have held her off like this. He seemed to be resigned to the loss of the money, but he was evidently going to take it out in another way. Leona would have given years of her life to know which way.

There was nobody to turn to, nobody to advise her now, but Balmayne. He had done pretty well on the whole ; he had contrived to keep himself out of danger, and at the first sign of the collapse he would fly.

But anybody was better than the sapping away of mind and body brooding alone. Balmayne listened to everything with a grave face.

“ I quite agree with you over those notes,” he said. “ They must be recovered at any cost from Isidore.”

“ Think,” Leona whispered, “ set your wits to

work. Meanwhile I have asked him to come here to-night to dine. Between now and then we shall surely find some way. At present I can only think of drugging and stealing his keys. But with our experience we can surely find better methods than that."

"Isidore won't come," Balmayne said, curtly.

The prophecy proved to be correct. Isidore regretted that he had another engagement to dine out this evening. Perhaps it was only a pleasure deferred to the end of the week. Leona tore the paper up passionately.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### A SLICE OF LUCK

LYTTON AVENUE was quiet for once, and Leona Lalage was glad of it. She said truthfully that she had a splitting headache, so that she was thankful to be alone and lie down on a couch in the drawing-room with the lights lowered and eau de Cologne on her temples. Hetty sat a little way off engaged on some fancywork. It seemed hard to imagine that all this refinement and enviable luxury covered crime and mystery.

It was a little before eleven that Balmayne came in. He was very quiet and subdued; he sat and unfolded an evening paper. He shot a sign across to the Countess from a pair of eyes that gleamed like flames.

"I should like a fresh handkerchief, Hetty," she said. "Would you mind?"

Hetty was off at once. Balmayne jumped to his feet.

"You must try and pull yourself together," he said. "There has been an amazing piece of luck. Isidore was dining at the Lotus with Lawrence. We came down the steps together. There was a fire close by, and a hansom backed on to the pavement. To make a long story short, Isidore fainted

with the pain of a broken collarbone, and they took him to Charing Cross Hospital."

"You took him. In that case I need not ask——"

"You need not. I didn't take him personally. I took his keys."

Leona Lalage was off the sofa directly. She motioned to the door. As Hetty came back the sufferer crossed the room languidly, saying she was going to lie down on her bed. She required no attention, she only wanted to be absolutely quiet.

Once upstairs Balmayne followed. There was nobody on the landing.

"Now is your chance," he said. "It is a pretty neat turn of fortune for us. I've got the motor round and will meet you at the corner of the street. You had better be disguised."

"But I have only one disguise in the house—the old one."

"All the better. You are used to that, and carry it off naturally. I have the key not only of the safe but of the street door as well. All you have to do is to proceed to the sitting-room where you have been before and help yourself. Then you can slip into Isidore's bedroom and lay the keys on the dressing-table. He will imagine that he left them behind when he changed his evening clothes. Are you up to it or not? Really, you look fearfully ill to-night."

The dark eyes were gleaming in the white face. Despite her racking head and her tired limbs, Leona was gradually summoning back her latent forces. Her hand no longer trembled, the wild beating of her heart was stilled.

"You can rely upon me," she whispered. "I shall not fail you. Too much depends upon my

success or failure to-night. Go round and get the motor whilst I slip into my old disguise. The thing can be done swiftly ; I can be back here again before anybody knows that I have gone."

"Lock your door as a precaution," Balmayne whispered. "I'm going now."

In the shadows Hetty listened to as much of the talk as she could hear. But nobody was going to leave the house without her knowledge. Behind the hangings in the hall she waited. Her patience was not unduly tried. There was a light footstep presently, a pause as if of precaution, and the Countess came downstairs. Her hair had become blonde, there was a lace shawl over her head, her skirts were short and trim.

She flashed across the hall without the slightest sound, and had passed into the street before Hetty deemed it prudent to follow. The girl was taking a terrible risk for the sake of her lover, and she knew it. But she must follow.

She did presently, keeping the Spanish figure in sight till the corner of the road was reached. There stood the black motor with its dull sides. The figure of the Countess sprang into it lightly. There was a touch of the lever, a click of metal, and then the swift machine was out of sight like a flash.

"Well, I can do no more at present," Hetty told herself. "I had better go to my room and wait for her return. What a wonderful woman ! Half-dead a few minutes ago, and now ready for a desperate errand like this !"

The motor sped on until it came at length to the corner of the street where Isidore's chambers were situated. It was a very quiet road, and few people

were about. Quite calmly and collectedly Leona alighted.

"It's the fifth house," she said. "I shall trust to chance that the people are in bed. If not, I dare say I shall have a good tale to tell."

"Go in and win," Balmayne whispered. "Always back your luck."

Leona Lalage came to the house at length. So far as she could see no lights were anywhere except in the hall, where there was a faint spot of gas. Everything was going to turn out favourably. Evidently the landlady had gone to bed, or the gas would not be so low. It was easy to pick the latchkey out of the bunch that she held in her hand. The lock turned easily and smoothly, and she was in the hall.

Silence everywhere. Evidently the whole household was in bed. There was another tiny crumb of gas burning on the landing, just outside Isidore's sitting-room door. The door of the room was closed. Leona opened it quietly and boldly and entered. The place was in absolute darkness.

Where was she to find the matches, for she had none of her own? She fumbled her way to the fireplace, but could find nothing she required. It seemed to her that she could hear somebody breathing in the room besides herself. But this she put down to the worn and disordered state of her nerves.

Ah, there were the matches at last. She could hear them rattling as they fell to the floor. She struck one, and the sudden flare half blinded her. Then she turned all the burners on, and the sudden glitter of it made her start. Really she was a good deal more ill and shaky than she had imagined.



Light at last. The blinds were up, but that did not matter. Leona turned and looked round the room. A man, seated in a chair, a dark and gloomy man with brooding eyes, rose and confronted her.

"A strange place to meet," he said, "but we have met at last."

Leona Lalage strove to speak, but the words froze on her lips. She was face to face with Garrett Charlton !

## CHAPTER XLIV

### AT LAST

**F**OR the first time in her life Leona Lalage felt inclined to give up the struggle. Turn whichever way she would fate was ever against her. The shock of these constant surprises was fast breaking down her iron nerves.

She stood there face to face with the last man in the world she desired to see. Her breath came fast as if she had been running far, there was not a trace of colour on her cheeks. Charlton could see the black pupils dilating like those of a cat. The woman had been brought to bay.

If she could only get away ! But Charlton stood between her and the door. He would recognize her now as his late wife's companion, but once her disguise was put aside would he recognize the Countess Lalage ?

The shock was dying away. After all, what was the accusation ? And yet Charlton was looking at her with the eyes of a man who has found out everything. They stood confronting one another for some time in silence. It was Charlton who first spoke. He came a step or two nearer.

"So we have met at last," he said. "Well, murderess ?"

"That is a word that does no harm," Leona said. "What have I done?"

"What I have said. You murdered my wife as surely as if you had driven a knife into her breast. She found you out in my absence. And to shield yourself and come between husband and wife you forged an infamous letter. Oh, you well knew the emotional nature you had to deal with, you counted on it. That forgery had the desired effect, and my wife poisoned herself. You would have got that letter back, but I returned unexpectedly. I kept that letter which would have saved my good name, but I preferred to remain silent so that it might go to the world that my wife had found no suicide's grave. I have that letter."

"I don't doubt it," Leona said coolly. Her restless eyes were seeking a way of escape. "But many would say it was no forgery at all. You cannot prove that I had anything to do with it. There, let me pass." She advanced, but Charlton waved her back.

"Not yet," he said. "I am not going to throw this chance away. I came here to see Mr. Isidore, and I elected to wait. It was one of the best hour's work I ever did. When you leave here it will be for a gaol."

Leona smiled scornfully. She had no fear of that.

"On what charge, may I ask?" she demanded.

"On a charge of theft. You robbed my wife and she found you out. One of the servants found you out as well. You had barely time to conceal those jewels and get away. After a time you came back for them. You stole them from their hiding-place."

"Ah, this is serious. How did you know that?"

"Because I saw you—you and your infamous accomplice, Balmayne."

"Then it really was your face in the window!" Leona cried. "There, I have admitted it, though I had not meant to do so. Not that it matters. I could swear that I had denied it all along. If you have witnesses——"

"I had witnesses; I was not in the house alone. There are other people interested in the Spanish woman with the fair hair and mantilla—the woman who was in the Corner House at the time of the murder!"

The scornful smile froze on Leona's face. She had utterly forgotten for the moment that she stood face to face now with two grave perils.

"The name of your witness?" she demanded, hoarsely.

"All in good time," Charlton replied. "Now I have found you once again I can punish you and clear my wife's good name at the same time. I have only to lock the door and summon the police by way of the window. If everything else fails I can have you punished for the theft of those jewels."

"That is if you can find any trace of them."

"I have seen them; I have had them in my hands." Charlton was about to say more, but he checked himself in time. After all, the woman and her accomplice had not stolen the real gems, but the paste imitations. But Lawrence would be in a position to clear that point.

"If I confess," Leona suggested—"if I confess, will you promise——"

"I promise nothing. You are in no position to dictate terms. Sit down and tell me the history of the forgery."

The woman's eyes flashed again. All this was taking time. Balmayne would wonder what had happened to her. From the bottom of her heart she was praying that he might come up and see. Not that there was much real hope of that—physical courage was not one of Louis Balmayne's strong points.

No, if there was a way to safety she would have to find it herself. And there was a long knife under the folds of her dress. If she could only get a chance to use it! After that the fair Spaniard would disappear, never to be seen again. Of her real identity this man could not possibly know.

"I'll tell you," she said. "I procured a letter of yours. I cut out words here and there, and made a long letter of them. Then I had the whole thing photographed. After that my task was easy, it was only a matter of time. Even from a child I always had a gift that way. If you will give me paper and pen I will show you."

Charlton complied. Leona Lalage used the pen, which she expressed herself as very dissatisfied with. She called for another.

Charlton rummaged on a table with his head down. Like a cat Leona sprang forward. Something bright glittered in the air. The man turned just in time to save the steel crashing between his ribs, it glanced off between his shoulders, there was a sharp spasm of pain as he fell. Just for an instant he was unconscious. Then, as suddenly as it had gone, reason came back to him. He heard the trip of feet down the stairs, he heard the rattle and

banging of a door. He was bleeding freely, but he managed to drag himself to the window.

"Murder!" he yelled. "Police, arrest that woman ; she has tried to kill me!"

## CHAPTER XLV

### A CHASE

MEANWHILE, Balmayne had been waiting impatiently for the return of his companion. Half an hour passed, and there was no sign of her return. There had been so many accidents and strokes of ill-luck lately that even Balmayne was nervous. He had half a mind to go and see what was wrong, but he changed his mind and lighted a cigarette instead.

He was angry and afraid at the same time. Twice already the same policeman had passed the black motor, and had examined it critically. The third time he came round he would be pretty sure to want to know why it was still there. If——

A sudden cry smote the air, a yell of murder followed by the quick rush of footsteps. A police-whistle screamed hoarsely, there were answering whistles out of the darkness. The rush of footsteps drew nearer. The next instant, sobbing breathlessly, Leona Lalage flung herself headlong into the car.

"What on earth," Balmayne began, "what on earth——"

"Don't stop to ask questions," Leona panted.

"Get along quickly. Go home by as long a route as you can. Ah, they are coming."

A policeman was coming. He hailed the car. He could have no suspicion of its occupants as yet, he only sought information. Balmayne pulled the lever and the car started. The officer yelled instructions to somebody in the darkness; from point to point the message went along. There was no escape unless good luck stood on their side. And the motor was terribly swift.

"And now perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what it's all about," Balmayne growled as the motor sped along. "What was the fuss about?"

"I found Charlton there," Leona panted. "Above all persons in the world, I found Charlton there. He was sitting in the darkness waiting for Isidore——"

"Then you haven't even got the notes?"

"The notes! I had more important matters to think of. I found matches and lighted the gas. And there sitting opposite me was Charlton. It was part of my wretched luck that I should have stumbled on him in this disguise. Had I been differently dressed he would never have recognized me. I——. Faster, faster."

A policeman stepped out of the gloom and tried to pull up the car. It flashed by him at the rate of 70 miles an hour.

"I would have made some excuse and got away," Leona went on. "But he had me fast. He was going to send me to gaol. That would have been a pretty thing for Countess Lalage! But he only knew me for what I used to be. If I could only get away and destroy the disguise he would never get on my track again. I pretended that I could not



fight him any more ; I lulled his suspicions to sleep I was going to show him how the forgery was done. He stooped to get me a pen and the knife went into his shoulder. Had he not moved I should have killed him. He managed to creep to the window and give the alarm."

Leona stopped for want of breath. Her face was streaming with moisture. The fierce rush of cold air cooled her heated temples.

"There was nothing else for it," she said. "I wish I had killed him, then I should have got the notes and returned home comfortably. As it is half the officers in London are looking for the car at the present moment. See that !"

She tugged at Balmayne's arm. A cordon of men were drawn up across the road. With marvellous dexterity Balmayne whipped the car round almost into a set of men who scattered right and left. One clung to the back of the car for a moment, but Balmayne beat him off at length.

"Turn down Churton Street," Leona whispered. "There seems to be nobody at that corner. If we can only get round by way of Hill Crescent we may manage to escape yet. Once in the square we can baffle them."

It was quiet enough in Churton Street. And again in Collin's Crescent, which was so near home that the long line of Lytton Avenue could be seen. But there again standing figures came out of the gloom and the car sped on.

"So near and yet so far," said Balmayne between his teeth. "The best thing would be to climb the railings and hide in one of the gardens, only it would mean abandoning the car. And we might just as well give ourselves up as that."

Leona nodded, the spirit of adventure was upon her now, it fired her blood. And there was something intoxicating about that maddening pace. Still, they could not go on at that speed for ever. Another half an hour at that speed and the petrol must give out. Balmayne was growing anxious.

"Another dash round, then I must try the lane at the back of the house," he said. "The car can't go on like this for ever."

They sped on again, finding the avenues of escape gradually closing in. Day and night there are always people in the London streets, and the news was flying far that murder had been committed, and that the culprits were escaping in a fast motor. By an extra spurt of speed a rope drawn across the roadway near the avenue was just escaped. A yell of execration followed from the crowd.

The car flashed round the corner of Lytton Avenue on two wheels. There was a jolt and a crash as the flying machine went over a balk of wood laid across the road, and the next instant the occupants were rolling across the path. Just for the moment there was nobody in sight.

"Quick," cried Balmayne, as he pulled his companion to her feet. "You don't seem to be hurt, It's a mystery we were not killed. There's a rail out of the long line of rails in the square yonder, close here. Ah! Now you squeeze through and I'll follow. We shall save our skins yet."

They crawled through and hid themselves in the black shrubs. A policeman came running up and surveyed the wreck thoughtfully. His lantern played all over it, he stooped down and rubbed at the dull frame-work vigorously.

“Why, what’s this?” he exclaimed. “What does the game mean?”

“Found anything out, mate?” another officer asked.

“Found out a lot,” said the first policeman. “This motor’s as bright as your lantern really. It’s all covered over with blacklead.”

## CHAPTER XLVI

### HETTY LEARNS SOMETHING

A SEARCH was being made for the fugitives in every place but the right one. The railings of the square were high, so that it never occurred to any one that the culprits might have escaped that way. They had got off somehow. In the opinion of most of the people there they had stopped the motor and started it again on its headlong course, after which they had mingled with the crowd.

Gradually Lytton Avenue grew quiet again. Leona Lalage stood up so that the light of a lamp outside showed her up in a ghastly fashion. She had lost her fair wig somewhere, her face was all cut and bleeding, her left ankle was painfully sprained.

"Do I look very dreadful?" she asked.

"Your face is all cut about," Balmayne growled. "I should think that you will not be able to show up in society for some time to come."

Leona Lalage thought little about that. She had about her those who were skilful in the way of paint and powder. An artist in face treatment would remove all traces of those cuts in a short

time. What she was most anxious to do now was to find herself at home. Those nerves were coming back again.

"Let us get in," she said hoarsely. "A cold bath, to say nothing of a deep, deep drink. I want brandy, a lot of brandy, and soda water. Is the coast clear?"

The coast was clear apparently, and the two culprits crept out. They reached the house at length and tried the door. It was fast! The Countess shook her hands passionately.

"Where's the sense in making that noise?" Balmayne growled. "Why didn't you bring your latchkey as I suggested, instead of leaving the front door open? Some zealous policeman found it open and rang the servants up."

"We must try the back gate," Leona suggested.

They crept round there unseen by dint of this and that doorway, but there was no luck that night. The little gate was fast. Hetty had seen to that. She had made up her mind to know what time the Countess returned, together with all other information possible.

"You'll have to knock them up," said Balmayne, between his teeth. "It will take time and it will be dangerous. But there's nothing else for it that I can see. Say you have had a spill out of a cab or something of that kind. When you have busted them off upstairs again I'll sneak into the house. I could do with a cigarette and a brandy and soda quite as much as you can."

It was hard work to make anybody hear, especially as a watchful policeman might come along at any moment. But presently a light gleamed behind the stained glass of the front door, and then Hetty's

face came into sight. She looked heavy and sleepy, a white wrap was about her shoulders.

But her stare of amazement was quite unaffected. She it was who had locked the front door with the full determination of only opening at her will. But she had not expected to see a figure like this.

"I—I was nearly asleep," she stammered, "when I heard the bell. And the moment I heard it I came down. Why—why—oh, what has happened?"

There was no acting here—at least not for the moment. Hetty's gentle heart was touched by the physical wreck before her. Here was a woman in distress who wanted the aid and assistance of a sister.

"Let me look at you," she said, tenderly. "Let me get water and some towels."

But the Countess thrust her fiercely aside.

"I can do all that for myself presently," she said. "I—I was lured on a fool's errand, and I have had a narrow escape of my life. Don't ask any questions yet. Go to the sideboard and get me brandy; there are some syphons of soda water there. Give me a lot, fill the glass; more brandy."

The soda water hissed and bubbled in the long glass. Leona raised it to her lips and drained it to the last drop. A little splash of colour crept into her scarred cheek, she drew a long, shuddering sigh.

But Hetty's curious eyes were upon her. Surely some further information was needed of this midnight adventure! And just for the moment Leona Lalage could think of nothing that sounded like the truth. She would have to appeal to Hetty and throw herself on her kindly feeling.

"I am going to my room now," she said. "I

feel better. Hetty, I have done a foolish thing to-night. I—I did it for the sake of another. It was a plot to rob and perhaps murder me, but I didn't know it. Promise me on your honour that you will never speak of this to a soul."

The promise thrilled on Hetty's lips. But might not this be all part of the conspiracy by which her lover's good name had terribly suffered? Perhaps later on, her testimony on this head might be all important.

There was a faint moaning cry in the doorway, a tiny white figure stood there. Mamie had been awakened by the ringing of the bell, she had missed Hetty, and had come down in her childish way to see what was the matter.

"Oh, mother," she cried. "What is the matter? What have they been doing to you?"

She advanced rubbing her terrified eyes, but Hetty barred the way, and caught the little one up in her arms.

"It is nothing, darling," she said as she kissed the white lips. "Mother has been masquerading, it is a part of her dress. You must come to bed with me at once; there is a terrible draught here. Come along."

Hetty swept out of the room and up the stairs, glad to escape without giving the word that would have sealed her lips. To-morrow Bruce should know all of this. She slipped into her bedroom and locked the door. She was longing for the time when she could get away from this horrible house. She was staying for Gordon's sake. But how much longer would she be called upon for the sacrifice?

Meanwhile Balmayne had crept in downstairs. He crossed over and helped himself liberally to

brandy. He took a second glass, and a third. But there came none of the glow of courage to his heart.

"What's to be done now?" he asked.

Leona made no reply. Her eyes were fixed moodily on space.



## CHAPTER XLVII

### FLOWN

WITH a white oblong sheet of paper in his pocket with the signature of the chief magistrate at Bow Street, Prout went down jauntily to call upon Lawrence. The latter looked at him smilingly.

"You are going to arrest Countess Lalage?" he asked.

"Well, I don't know anything about that," Prout said, taken aback. "But I've certainly got a warrant for the arrest of Leona Lalage. Mr. Lawrence, I've solved the problem of the blacklead I found in the Corner House."

"That's clever. How did you manage it?"

"Well, fortune was kind to me. I couldn't think what that blacklead was doing there."

"I could have told you. I knew that as far back ago as the first inquest on Leon Lalage. Our friend the Countess has a fast motor. It was so fast that she could be in two places at once. But it became necessary to disguise the motor—the black motor that Miss Lawrence and the newspaper man saw. It must be a disguise that would come off easily. What better than blacklead, that could be removed from the bright parts with a damp rag and restored

with a touch? The black motor came to grief last night, I see."

"Ah! you read that in the paper, sir. And, of course, you knew all about the attempt on the life of Mr. Charlton by the fair Spaniard. Well, she was seen to escape in that motor, and near the scene of the smash we found the wig. The manufacturer of the car has been seen and he is prepared to swear whom he sold it to. Therefore, knowing what we do I took the liberty of swearing an information before Sir John at Bow Street, and I've got the warrant for the arrest of Leona Lalage in my pocket. We shall get her on one charge if we fail in another."

"You can't fail," said Lawrence quietly. "When I come to give evidence the character of my friend Dr. Bruce will be restored beyond question. By the way, I have not heard how Mr. Charlton is to-day."

Prout remarked that Charlton was better. Fortunately no great damage had been done. He was suffering from some loss of blood, but in a day or two the patient would be able to give evidence. There would be enough sensation for the papers to-morrow.

The detective went calmly on his way to Lytton Avenue. The Countess was not down yet, but if the caller would send up his business it should be attended to. Prout was firm, but his business was for the private ear of the lady of the house alone, and he would wait her good pleasure. He was quite easy in his mind, seeing that he was not alone, but accompanied by two officers in plain clothes, one being stationed in the front of the house and the other at the rear.

It was Hetty who came back with the second message that the Countess would see her visitor presently in her dressing-room. The girl started as she recognized the features of the detective.

"Is there anything wrong?" she asked.

Prout gave his information in a low voice. He could trust Hetty, and besides, she might have some valuable information to impart.

"Did you see anything queer last night, Miss?" he asked.

Hetty hesitated. It seemed hardly fair. And yet so much might depend upon her speaking. Nothing could save the Countess from arrest now. Rapidly, but clearly, she told Prout all that there was to tell.

"That clenches it," he said. "Now where did they hide themselves?"

A bell rang somewhere overhead, and Prout was summoned by a tall footman, who sniffed at him suspiciously as he led the way upstairs. In a magnificent wrap Leona Lalage sat. There was a cup of coffee before her. In a flash she saw exactly what had happened. Her hand did not shake now, the cigarette between her lips was steady. She had known that sooner or later this blow must fall.

It was only in a very strong light that traces of last night's adventures could be seen on her face. Just a little sigh of passionate regret escaped her, and then she was her own calm smiling self again.

"I fancy I have seen you before," she said. "Are you not the detective who has the Corner House mystery in hand?"

Prout admitted that such was the case.

"I am not here about that," he said, "at least, not for the present. I am afraid I have some bad news for you. I am speaking to the lady who is known to people generally as Countess Lalage."

"I am Countess Lalage," was the calm reply.

"As you like, madame," Prout said indifferently. "I have a warrant for the arrest of Leona Lalage on a charge of attempted murder. I can't say any more at present, and it will be as well for you to say as little as possible."

The Countess bowed; not for an instant did she change colour.

"I'll dress at once," she said. "My bedroom door is locked, so this is the only way I can escape. Get out something dark for me to wear, Hannah."

She called thus to her maid inside. With a smile she intimated to Prout that she might keep him a little time waiting. It did not matter how long seeing that he had his bird fast in the toils.

A quarter of an hour passed, and then a trim maid with dark short hair, and in the smart starched style peculiar to good servants, appeared. She gave one glance of indifference at Prout, and then passed down the stairs. From his window he could see the very neat figure crossing the square.

Time passed and he grew impatient. He coughed as he looked into the bedroom. Then he said something strong under his breath. Nobody was there. The opposite door was locked, but the bird had flown.

With a disturbed face Prout passed into the street. The men were still there.

"See anybody leave the house?" Prout asked.

"Nobody but a servant, and a pretty one," the other said.

"Then you be after her as soon as possible," Prout groaned. "We're done, Smithers. That smart lady's-maid was Countess Lalage!"

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### HETTY SPEAKS OUT

THERE was a good deal of whispering and talking in corners and under the trees at Longmere House. A fussy little man with an eyeglass seemed to have a great deal to say. Lady Longmere laughed somewhat scornfully as she watched him. A great pile of strawberries were on her plate.

"I have a great many faults," the pretty American heiress said, "but scandal never was one of them. Look at that little wretch of a Mosley Harcourt. Nobody likes him, and nobody is free from his poisonous tongue, but he goes everywhere because he has the very latest gossip."

Hetty nodded absently; in society parlance Lady Longmere had taken Hetty up. Since the night of the card party at Lytton Avenue, when her ladyship had foresworn cards for good and all, she had seen a good deal of Hetty. And she was one of the few who stuck loyally to Bruce.

"Here's your young man," she said presently. "He didn't want to come, but I made a special journey and persuaded him. Never hide yourself at times like this."

"Gordon is very sensitive," said Hetty. "That's the kind of thing that hurts."

She clutched at the handle of her sunshade passionately as a society leader responded to Bruce's uplifted hat by a cold stare.

"And Gordon saved that woman's life," Hetty said. "He sat up all one night with her and part of the second. It's very hard, Lady Longmere."

Lady Longmere replied generally that it would benefit Bruce in the long run. Lady Rockingham came up and said it was very hot. After his rebuff Bruce stood by as if unconscious of Lady Rockingham's presence.

"Surely your ladyship knows Dr. Bruce!" Hetty said with a vivid splash of colour on either cheek. "A little time ago I understood that Dr. Bruce——"

"Dr. Bruce perfectly understands," Lady Rockingham said coldly.

"But you evidently don't," Hetty said coolly. "I was going to give your ladyship a little information. I fancy you were present at Lytton Avenue the night of the card party when those mysterious notes were produced. It was never known exactly who paid them over to Mr. Isidore, but I know now. They came from Countess Lalage; indeed, she admitted as much to my uncle, Mr. Lawrence."

Bruce drew Hetty gently away. The girl was sore and angry, and might be betrayed into saying something that she would be sorry for afterwards. After all, it did not matter much so long as they had one another.

The grounds were large and secluded; there were plenty of spots there for lovers. They might have been far away in the country.

"I have been talking to Lawrence," Bruce

said. "My dear little girl, I have only learnt lately what you have endured for me. If these people had found you out they would most certainly have murdered you."

Hetty smiled lightly. She had her own reward. It would be mainly due to her that her lover's good name would be cleared.

"But it makes my blood boil to see you treated in that way by that woman," she cried, "especially after what you did for her. I long to tell her who the real culprit was, and that in a few days a woman in whose house she had been would be arrested for the crime."

"I'm glad you didn't," Bruce smiled. "What a sensation those good people will have presently! And most of them have been on intimate terms with our Countess. My darling, I shall never be easy in my mind till you are out of that house."

"And I shall never go till I can make some arrangements for Mamie," Hetty said. "Of course the secret cannot be kept much longer, and then I suppose everything will be seized by the creditors. But even the servants are in the dark as yet."

Bruce nodded moodily. He seemed to have something on his mind that he could not throw off. The cloud lifted a little under Hetty's blandishments; it was impossible to sit looking into those clear eyes and be wholly unhappy.

"You have some trouble," Hetty said anxiously.

"I have," Gordon said, "but I shan't tell it to you to-day. Let us talk of something else. Let us forget the world for ourselves."

A band was playing somewhere; there were voices pitched high close by; then came the clear laugh of Lady Longmere.



"Say, what a comedy!" she said. "What does it matter? It will be something to say afterwards that we knew the woman."

"I can't believe it," said Lady Rockingham. "Mr. Harcourt, are you quite clear and certain of your facts? Who told you?"

"Shouldn't dare to speak thus of the fascinating Lalage," Harcourt, the little man with the eyeglass, drawled. "Should be afraid of a knife in my back, or something horribly Corsican of that kind. Can't tell you any more except I know the police had a warrant for her arrest, and that she's bolted."

"And she's got a diamond star of mine worth a thousand pounds!" Lady Rockingham screamed. "A stone was missing, and she offered to have it replaced for me out of her stock of loose diamonds. I made a friend of that woman, a vulgar adventuress, who steals brooches and the like."

"Be a lesson to us all," Harcourt said sapiently, "for at least a month. And then we shall run after the next flashy adventurer who comes along. Give me the money, and I'll put any gutter flower-girl in society, and at the top of all in a month. It's only a question of cash."

The speaker passed on. Hetty seemed amused about something.

"So the story has leaked out," she said. "But it has its funny side. Fancy Leona Lalage getting Lady Rockingham's star like that! It was the sort of cynical thing she would have enjoyed."

Bruce held up his hand for silence.

"What are the boys saying in Piccadilly?" he asked.

The cries came nearer ; a familiar name was mentioned.

“Latest society scandal!” came the shrill voices. “Latest society sensation! Flight of the Countess Lalage!”

## CHAPTER XLIX

### IN THE DEAD OF THE NIGHT

THE story flashed like lightning from one end of London to the other. Leona Lalage had been an important personage. Her face was familiar to the society paper window ; no report of a great function was complete without a description of her dress. She was a constant source of "copy" to the paragraphists ; her dinners and her parties were things to imitate and envy. And now the crash had come.

It was the sensation of the hour. Every penny paper had a portrait of sorts of Leona Lalage. The wildest rumours were afloat. As far as anybody knew for the present, the Countess was not at home, and the servants could give no clue as to her whereabouts.

To-morrow a whole hoard of tradesmen would be down upon Lytton Avenue, but for the present Hetty was left in peace. Mamie was very far from well, flushed and feverish, so that at eleven o'clock she decided to call in Bruce. She rang the bell, but no servant appeared. She rang again, and went down presently into the basement to investigate.

There was no sign of a servant to be seen any-

where. They had all packed up their boxes, and fled, as rats quit a sinking ship.

Hetty was alone in the house. At any rate there was the telephone. Dr. Bruce was out, they told her, but expected in shortly, when he should have the message. It was not nice to be alone in so large a house with a sick child, but Hetty had no fear. All the horrors and all the tragedies had gone with the Countess. It was quite late when Bruce arrived. He asked no questions, as Hetty let him in herself. And Hetty said nothing of the fact that she had been deserted. It would only make Gordon uneasy, and she was certain that she could manage alone.

"Of course you can, darling," Bruce said fondly. "If ever there was a born nurse you are one. I don't like the look of the child at all. She ought to be got away from here to the seaside. Fresh air and salt water is what she wants."

The child lay between waking and sleeping. Her cry was for water.

"Not too much water," said Bruce. "A little now, and some fresh cold water later on. I shall give her a few of those drops I prescribed for her last week. Four now, and four in an hour's time. But be very careful as to the dose."

Hetty produced the little phial marked "poison," and examined the label. She had administered the medicine before, usually she kept it locked up. As she poured out the drops she had a curious sensation that she was being watched. Her hand shook so that she had to try again before she was satisfied.

"Are you nervous to-night?" Bruce asked.

"Not more than usual," said Hetty. "Once I get

away from this house I shall be all right, and that looks as if it won't be long."

Bruce lingered as if loth to depart. The house seemed wonderfully silent. Bruce went down the stairs presently, accompanied by Hetty.

"Good night, my darling," he said, as he kissed her fondly. "You'll be compelled to leave here to-morrow, and I only hope the child will be better. Thank goodness, Gilbert Lawrence will be only too glad to have you."

Hetty fastened the door carefully. Now that she was alone she was feeling more horribly nervous than ever. She locked most of the downstairs doors, and it was only sheer self-contempt that prevented her from fastening her bedroom door. It required a deal of courage to sleep in a large, empty house.

Mamie had half-dropped asleep, but she opened her eyes again as Hetty entered.

"You have been so long," she said, pitifully, "so very long. And why didn't you come when I heard you standing by the door."

"I wasn't standing by the door," Hetty said, quietly.

"But indeed you were. I called out and you said 'Hush' very quietly. Then I heard the rustle of your dress as you went down the stairs."

Hetty murmured something to the effect that she had forgotten. There was no reason to contradict and argue over a child's fancies. Mamie murmured again.

"Take the drops first," Hetty suggested.

Mamie declined fretfully. "She wanted water, and that on the table was quite warm. With a patient smile Hetty went downstairs to get more.

Mamie drank thirstily. Hetty picked up the little bottle to pour out the drops.

By sheer habit she looked at the label. It was the same, and not the same. Hetty stifled a cry of surprise. She had made no mistake before—of that she was certain. Then what could possibly have happened? Somebody had crept into the room in her absence and changed the bottles!

There could be no doubt about that. The label had the same chemist's name on it, with the red caution of "Poison" underneath. The girl put the bottle to her nostrils and noticed the difference in the smell.

The discovery turned her sick and faint. That any one should deliberately try and take an innocent life like this filled her with loathing.

Mamie had dropped into what looked like a sound sleep. Hetty lay on the bed with the light out. She had the switch to her hand, she could lie there with the chance that the fiend who had done this thing would come back. More than one person in the house had known that that medicine was an experiment. If Mamie died it would do Bruce incalculable harm. And she herself might suffer. A thousand horrors rose out of the darkness and mocked at Hetty.

She lay there waiting patiently. Soon it seemed to her that somebody was in the room. She could hear breathing that was not her own, and the creep, creep of drapery. There was a faint rattle on the stand where the medicine stood, so faint that it would not have been heard by any but strained ears.

Hetty could stand it no longer. Her fingers went out to the electric switch, there was a sudden

snap, and the room was bathed in light. There was a startling cry from a woman who stood just under the light with a bottle in her hand—the real bottle, as Hetty could see quite plainly.

“Now I have got you, murderess!” Hetty cried.

The woman reached up a long white hand, and taking the bulb of the swinging electric light in her grasp desperately, crushed it to pieces. Then there was swift darkness again and the rush of flying feet.

## CHAPTER L

### THREATENED RUIN

**I**F there was a dark mystery any longer it was confined to the Corner House now. Hetty was not likely to see any more of Lytton Avenue. It was fortunate for her that Mamie was so much better in the morning, for as soon as the business of the day had commenced there was a rush of people to Lytton Avenue.

They poured in thick and fast till the law intervened in the person of a posse of officials who represented the Sheriff of London, and then Hetty was permitted to pack up her belongings and those of the child and depart. Gilbert Lawrence received them with open arms. Bruce was there, pleased enough to get Hetty from the house where she had suffered so much. But there was a white despairing look that caused Hetty to forget her own troubles.

The white look did not even vanish when Hetty spoke of her previous night's adventure.

"It was part of a plot to ruin us both," Bruce said moodily. "I should have been charged with criminal carelessness, which is fatal to a doctor, and you would have been guilty of administering an overdose. That woman, we know who she was, changed the bottles once and would have changed



them again, in fact that is why she returned—the Countess.”

“Oh, no,” Hetty cried. “She never could have done that. Her own child, Bruce? Fancy a mother sacrificing the life of her own child to gratify a vengeance! I could not think as badly of her as that.”

Bruce smiled wearily.

“Are you quite sure,” he asked, “that Mamie is her own child?”

Hetty had no reply for the moment. That idea had never occurred to her before. Certainly she had never looked upon the Countess as a model mother; indeed, she had never seen her display what might be called natural affection.

“We shall probably never know,” she said after a pause. “But as to your own trouble, Gordon, dear Gordon, why don’t you confide in me?”

The appeal in the thrilling tender voice touched him. He took the slim figure in his arms and kissed the red lips.

“It’s ruin,” he said simply, “nothing else. A little time ago it looked to me as if all my ambitions were to be realised. And then this crushing misfortune comes upon me. My practice falls away, and I could not get my money in. Of course I can’t dun patients like mine. It didn’t matter till lately, because the guineas I got from consultations were keeping me going. But these morning callers call no more. I was pressed here and there, and I borrowed money.”

“Not from those people who advertise, Gordon?”

“I am afraid I was as foolish as that,” Bruce said, with a faint smile. “That sort of people seem to know when one is under the weather.

And there was one very plausible fellow who sent me a confidential letter. I fell into the trap, and if I can't find £500 to-morrow I am ruined."

Hetty turned pale. But no word of reproach passed her lips. It was no time for that. And she knew by repute the kind of creditor that Gordon had. She merely asked the name of the obdurate creditor.

"I shall find some way out of it," she said. "Now go back to your work. Courage, dearest."

She kissed him tenderly, and pushed him from the room. Already she had made up her mind exactly what to do. Mamie must sit down and be good till teatime, after which she should go in the park and feed the swans. Half an hour later and Hetty was calling upon Izaak Isidore to ask his advice.

Isidore received his visitor warmly. He had taken a great fancy in his calm way to the pretty, plucky girl who had played so fine a part in the elucidation of a great mystery and a cruel wrong. He listened to what Hetty had to say.

"I thought you would find a way out," she suggested.

"Well, so I can," Isidore smiled. "I am not going to offer to lend that young man money, because that would wound his pride. Besides, there will be no occasion. Now, can you let me know the name of Bruce's creditor?"

Hetty gave the desired information. There was a peculiar smile on the face of her companion.

"I fancy I can see my way to settle this business," he said. "In my early days I saw a deal of the shady side of finance—as a lad I was in the office of one of the very worst of them. I know all about

this fellow. He is going to climb down, he is going to take a reasonable rate of interest, and he is going to give your lover time. You can make your mind easy about that."

And Isidore pulled at his cigar thoughtfully. He seemed so strong and confident that Hetty was strangely comforted.

"I thought I could rely upon you," she said gratefully. "Mr. Isidore, you have taken a great load from my mind."

Isidore finished his cigar, after which he took a frugal omnibus to the City, getting down in the neighbourhood of Cheapside. He found himself presently in a dingy office off Ironmonger Lane, and face to face with a fat, oily man, who recognized him with a mixture of admiration and apprehension.

"It's about that business of Dr. Gordon Bruce," Isidore said curtly. "Now, my friend Wolffman, you know me and I know you. I don't want to ruin you body and bones, but I shall do so unless you listen to reason. You are going to write to Dr. Bruce, and tell him the matter shall stand over for the present——"

"But my principal!" gasped Wolffman. "The lady who is paying me——"

"To ruin Dr. Bruce," Isidore said, as coolly as if a great light had not suddenly broken in upon him. "So your friend is in London?"

Wolffman wriggled uneasily. He wanted to lie badly, but with those eyes upon him he could not do so.

"She was yesterday," he stammered.

"Ah, then, you must dissemble with her. Tell her any lie you like so long as you let Dr. Bruce alone. I guessed there was some scheme on hand

when I heard that you had written to the Doctor. Good-bye, Wolffman, and recollect that your ruin or otherwise depends upon yourself."

Isidore went out smiling blandly. He had made a great discovery.

"The Countess again," he murmured. "She's in this, as I thought. And so she is still in London, after all. How interested Prout will be!"

## CHAPTER LI

### THE WOLF IS UNCHAINED

**P**ROUT was not surprised to receive the information that his quarry was still in London ; indeed, he would have been astonished to know the contrary. Every port and every outgoing vessel had been carefully watched. Still, the woman had accomplices somewhere. It was absurd to believe that in the simple guise of a maid she could have found a hiding place where she would be safe from the grip of the law.

"Find Balmayne, and you'll find her," Prout said. "If we get on the track this week we shall catch her, if not, she may get away. Vigilance is bound to be relaxed sooner or later. That is why delay is on the side of the prisoner."

"And if she does get away?" Isidore asked.

"Then she will go to some of her earlier haunts on the Continent," said Prout. "They always do. We can count upon that with absolute certainty."

"And you know all about her early haunts?"

Prout confessed that up to the present he had but the sketchiest idea of the past of the brilliant adventuress who called herself Countess Lalage.

He was just a little piqued that he should have been so easily gulled, especially as the case was exciting so ominous an amount of public attention. From all parts of the Continent stories were coming in telling of this and that swindled capitalist. The woman had flaunted for years with the money she had obtained by fraud. It was calculated that besides her debts she had got away with nearly a million of money.

It seemed incredible, but there it was, and there it will be again so long as human cupidity and human greed exist. Maitrank was the only man who was silent over his losses. He had been a fool, but the money was gone, and there was no reason why he should betray his folly aloud to the world.

"I think I'll go down to Holloway and see René Lalage," Prout said thoughtfully. "I dare say I shall be able to advise him to tell me something as to the past of the Countess. If only he were not secure, that woman would have to look to herself. He believes that the woman betrayed and murdered his brother, and he is a Corsican. Give him a few hours' start, and the law would be rid of Leona Lalage."

In his cell at Holloway René Lalage was disposed to be communicative. He spat furiously, his dark eyes gleamed at the mention of the woman.

"She was bad, utterly bad from a child," he said. "She was a distant connexion of the family. As a girl she set us all aflame with her beauty. She was the vainest and most cruel girl in the village. If she could rob another girl of her lover she was happy, and happier still in flinging him aside after. She was delighted when she could breed a

quarrel between two friends and get them to fight.

"Why she married Leon I cannot say. Perhaps it was because he bullied her. But Leon was no saint, and he drank, and he got into gaol, and Leona left him. For a long time we did not hear what had become of her. Then I saw her in Paris at a circus. A little time later and she was mixed up in politics in Rome. But she got steadily on, living in a more luxurious way till I lost sight of her altogether.

"We heard afterwards that she had gone through a form of marriage with a great nobleman, and that she was living in much splendour in England. But we know better. Leon and I had spent our little fortune long ago and sold the farm. After that we had to live by our wits, as you are aware, Signor Prout.

"Then we both drifted to England, neither of us knowing where the other was. I met Leon quite by accident. He said he had found his wife, and that she seemed to be rolling in money. She managed to lure him to the Corner House, where she kept him prisoner. But he got some money from her, and part of that he promised me. I never got it, as you know, and you can guess the reason why.

"Leon was in the way ; he had to be got rid of. If it had to be murder, why that woman would never have hesitated. We shall find out that it was done some way. And if ever I get out of this I will track her day by day and hour by hour. I will lure her into some quiet place, and then I shall plunge my knife into her as she plunged hers into my brother as he lay helpless. I tell you this, policeman as you are, because I am reckless, and there is blood in my eyes. Once I am free, my

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vengeance shall be complete. You may hang me, but you can't deprive me of that."

He spoke furiously under his breath, with the veins standing out on his forehead. He seemed to have almost forgotten the presence of Prout. The next moment he was quiet and smiling again, but Prout was not deceived. Once that man was free he would never go back on his word.

On the whole, the interview produced nothing of importance. Nor was Lawrence subsequently able to deduce anything from it.

"The fellow told you really nothing," he said thoughtfully, "at least, nothing that we can put to any practical use. He has his own vengeance to gratify, and therefore he is not in the least anxious to assist the law."

"He knew more than he would tell," said Prout.

"Of course he did. I shouldn't wonder if he knew where that woman is hiding. I am still of opinion that if you can find Balmayne you can find the chief culprit. If you come to me to-morrow evening I may manage to hammer out something, but my brain is addled for the present. I have a theory of my own, but it sounds a little too cold at present."

Prout dutifully returned the following evening, but Lawrence had nothing fresh to offer. He still clung to his new theory, but it was not sufficiently developed for practical use. And he didn't want to be laughed at, he said.

"I never laugh at your suggestions," Prout replied.

"Well, you're not going to have the chance over this now," said Lawrence. "If I had my own way—what a row those newsboys are making!"

There were yelling in the street below. As they



passed their raucous cries uprose so that from the babel some sense could be made—

“THE CORNER HOUSE MYSTERY!

“STARTLING DEVELOPMENTS!

“RENÉ LALAGE’S ESCAPE FROM HOLLOWAY!

“A WARDER SERIOUSLY INJURED!

“THE CULPRIT SUCCEEDS IN GETTING CLEAR  
AWAY!”

## CHAPTER LII

### THE CAGE IS OPENED

THERE was the sound of a faint scratching as if a mouse was working somewhere. The warder in the courtyard pronounced it to be a mouse and passed on. Then a figure, almost invisible in the gloom, crept along the top of the wall and dropped feet foremost into the street. It was nothing but luck that stood René Lalage in such good stead all along. A crumbling bit of plaster, some repairs going on in the gallery overhead, a ladder and a couple of gimlets left about by one of the carpenters engaged on the job.

Well, he was free. He did not hesitate for a moment. He darted swiftly down the road with the air of a man who knows exactly what he is doing and where he wants to go. The man had not been convicted yet, therefore he had the advantage of wearing his own clothes.

Using the tramline was a bit of a risk, but Lalage took it. He wanted to be on familiar ground before his escape had been discovered. He had one object steadily in view, and after that was done he cared nothing. He came at length to a dismal looking road leading off Waterloo Bridge. Before

what seemed an empty house he paused and knocked. A feeble gleam filtered in the fanlight and the door opened.

The man behind staggered back and muttered something that sounded like admiration. René Lalage stepped inside and shut the door.

"The others have not come yet," he said coolly. "I had arranged for the ceremony to take place without me. I was being detained elsewhere. But behold I am here to take my vengeance in my own hands. When the others come they will be surprised to see their leader again, Beppo."

The man addressed as Beppo nodded and grinned. There was nothing prepossessing about him. He looked the kind of man to avoid on a dark night. He led the way to a back room furnished only with a long table and a few chairs. Presently there was another knock at the door, and four men came in.

Picturesque, cut-throat-looking ruffians that might have come straight from the stage of the Surrey Theatre. These men were pleased to call themselves conspirators. But no patriotic business brought them here to-night.

Evidently René Lalage passed as leader of them. They greeted him with shouts of approval and many strange manifestations of pleasure. One by one they produced tobacco and cigarette papers until the room was dim with smoke.

"You got my letter, Luigi?" Lalage asked. The man addressed as Luigi nodded.

"Good!" Lalage went on. "That letter was written in gaol. It looked so innocent that the people there passed it. They did not know that

every letter had a meaning. It seemed all about my defence. You acted on that letter?"

"I did," Luigi growled. "I saw Antonio at once. It was not long before he was on the track. Your man will be here to-night."

They smoked on for some little time idly. These men were prepared for most things, but they preferred idleness and tobacco to anything else. It was only Lalage who was restless and uneasy. As the time passed he glanced impatiently at the door. Then there came another knock without.

Beppo crept to the door. He came back presently followed by two men. The latter one was dressed in superior fashion to the rest. With a yell Lalage flew across the room and turned the key in the lock.

"Enter, Signor Luigo Balmayne," he cried mockingly. "Signor, I have the honour to wish you a very good evening. You are most welcome."

Balmayne promptly collapsed into the chair that Beppo had put for him. He glanced in a white and agitated way round the room. There was not a friendly face to be seen anywhere. Given immunity from protection, and not one man there would have refused to cut his throat for a handful of coppers.

There was no avenue of escape. The man's life was in danger, and he knew it. With mocking politeness Lalage tendered him a cigarette. He pushed it aside; he could not have smoked for untold money. There was a great lump in his throat now, a wild beating of his heart.

"You know me?" Lalage said. "We have met

before. It was you who betrayed me to the police at Ravenna. In the dock there I swore to be revenged upon you. And I am a man of my word."

Balmayne tried to say something, but failed.

"I had two years for that," Lalage went on, "two weary years which is an agony to a restless man like myself. You betrayed me, because I was in your way, and so that you could keep the spoil to yourself. You were poorer and less prosperous in those days than you seem to be now. You are rich."

"I am as poor as yourself," Balmayne contrived to say.

"Ah! That is good hearing. You came here to-night expecting to see Ghetti. But we took the liberty of using Ghetti's name. It is only by the merest accident that I am here to-night to carry out this work. My good friends here would have done it for me otherwise. But I was fortunate enough to escape from the gaol yonder, and here I am."

Balmayne glanced miserably about him. He was not listening at all. He was calculating the chances of escape, of the fate that lay before him. Had this thing taken place in Corsica he would have been in no doubt for a moment. All these men were joined together by blood ties or something of that kind, and insult to one was an insult to another.

They had lured him there, and he had come with his eyes open. He cursed his folly. But then he had been hiding, and his money was gone. It seemed like a wonderful slice of luck to find Ghetti in London. And behold there was no Ghetti at

all, only this trap and the knowledge that his time was come.

“Well?” Lalage burst out, furiously. “Why don’t you speak; what have you got to say before I put the knife into your heart?”

## CHAPTER LIII

### FACE TO FACE

**B**ALMAYNE grovelled helplessly. There were tears in his eyes. The man could plot and intrigue, he could make the weapons for others, but he had no heart for them himself. He was an abject coward without feeling for anyone but himself. He would have left his nearest to starve or die without a prick of conscience, but he was nervous for himself. And he read his sentence in Lalage's eyes.

"Get up!" the latter cried. "Why do you grovel there? Faugh! you sicken me. Is there no spark of manhood in you at all? You are going to die."

An approving chorus followed from the others.

"You hear that?" Lalage went on. "You are going to die. Your life has been given over to me to do as I please with. There is one way to save your delicate skin, one way to freedom if you choose to take it."

Balmayne rose from the floor. Something like hope crept into his haggard eyes.

"It shall be done," he said hoarsely. "Speak."

"Ah, I knew you would listen to reason; I knew there was nothing so vile and degraded that you

would not do to save yourself. Answer me the question, then. Tell me at once where I can find Leona Lalage ? ”

Balmayne started. Not that he desired to show any courage and refuse. He knew why, none better, Lalage wanted to see his brother's wife. And he would have betrayed her to save himself without the smallest hesitation.

It would mean the loss of all his plans, it would mean hiding in poverty in England instead of something like luxury on the Continent, but he did not hesitate. Leona Lalage would never have acted like that.

“ I will show you where she is,” he said hoarsely.

“ Of course you will,” Lalage laughed. “ Heaven be praised you are no countryman of mine ? Oh you dog, you gutter cur, you slimy reptile, to betray a mere woman like this ! And not even to make a good fight of it. But whilst I revile you and try to get the blood into your white cowardly cheeks it is good that you should obey. I spare your life because it will not be for long.”

Balmayne sat there without a word. He had no feeling, no sense of shame.

“ I am going to take this man with me,” said Lalage as he rose. “ He is known to you all, and you have marked him well. In his way he will betray us if he can. He will not go to the police, because they may ask awkward questions, and as like as not there is a warrant out for his arrest also. But he is a man of many ideas. If anything happens to me, repeat it to the Brotherhood at the headquarters. After that I would not give a week for the life of this Balmayne.”

Balmayne nodded and turned. He knew only



too well what that threat meant. So far as he could see there was no way out of it whatever. He had come to the end of his resources. If he could only get away from this!

"Good-night, comrades," said Lalage. "I shall return presently. Come on, dog, follow at the heels of your master."

Lalage struck out boldly into the street followed by Balmayne. There was only one thing uppermost in his mind, one great project that filled his untutored brain. A great wrong had been done, and he was to right it by blood. There was no crime about this, it had been the custom of his race for centuries.

His own kin had been done to death, and he was going to avenge the murder. To this end he had caused Balmayne to be lured from his hiding place by those who knew how to bait the trap for the rascal. Once Balmayne was in his power he would be compelled to speak. And the night was very dark.

Balmayne slunk by the side of his companion. He longed to cry aloud that here was a man who had escaped from gaol, to have him bound hand and foot, and to feel that he was out of the way for the present. He wanted to go to the nearest policeman and tell him all this.

But then the police would want to know too much, and he did not feel that he himself was anything like out of the wood. Again, there was the Brotherhood. That it was no idle threat on the part of Lalage, Balmayne knew only too well. Once he betrayed the latter his life was not worth a week's purchase.

"Are we getting near the spot?" Lalage asked.

"We are getting very near now," Balmayne croaked.

They had come to a better part of the town. They paused at length before Lytton Avenue. The house of many festivities was dark and dismantled. There was no sign of life or movement there.

"A good idea," Lalage muttered. "An excellent doubling of the tracks. May I guess that you are going to meet Leona Lalage here to-night?"

Balmayne nodded. He spoke so low that the other hardly caught the words.

"Here is the latch key," he said. "There are several of them. There is no caretaker in the place as yet. Go in, you have no further need of me."

Lalage entered gently. He stood in the pitchy darkness for some time. He could not hear a sound. Presently his patience was rewarded. There was the click of a key in the door and something swished by him.

Lalage thrust out his arm and grasped a silken shoulder.

"Not a cry," he whispered, hoarsely. "I don't know the house and you do. I am going to hold on to you, and you are going to guide me to a back room where we can turn on the electric light in safety. And recollect that I have two hands, and that there is a long knife in the other one."

The woman moved on without further sound or protest. She came at length to a room at the back of the house, and fumbled along the wall. There was a click, and the place was flooded with brilliant light.

Leona Lalage fell back with a faint cry. Just for a moment she covered her eyes with her hands. Lalage stood like a statue. He smiled, but there was nothing of mirth in it.

"René Lalage!" Leona said. "You have come here to kill me!"

## CHAPTER LIV

### A STAB IN THE DARK

“IF there is one thing that is likely to come between you and Bruce,” said Lawrence, as he struggled into his overcoat, “it is your devotion to that child, Hetty. There is nothing the matter with her at all. She is merely suffering from strawberries. I had an idea to work this afternoon, contrary to my usual custom, and I soothed Mamie with strawberries. Blame me as you like, but there it is.”

Hetty laughed. It was past eleven, and Lawrence was going down to his club for an hour. The little girl had been a bit more fretful than usual.

“I’m so sorry for the poor child,” she said.

“And so am I. You’ve done as much for her as if she were your own, but all the same I should not be sorry if somebody claimed her. I’ve never had the slightest doubt that she is no relation to the Countess at all.”

“Then why should a woman like that encumber herself——”

“My dear child, I don’t look upon it in that light at all. The child gave our picturesque friend a certain distinction——My husband is dead, and

this is my only child,' and all that sort of thing. It pays in society."

With which cynical remark Lawrence lighted a cigarette and departed. From above the fretful voice of Mamie called to her dear Hetty. In sooth, the child was running a great risk of being spoiled.

"What is it, darling?" Hetty said. "What can I do for you?"

Mamie was thirsty. She scornfully refused a suggestion of soda-water; nothing would content her but a certain fruit salt that came from a certain place some way off. She was quite sure that she could not do without it, and that unless the salt was forthcoming she would have a dreadful headache in the morning.

"All right," Hetty said cheerfully. "I'll go and get it for you."

There was the best part of a mile to go; it was getting very late, but Hetty had not been out all day, so that she enjoyed the walk. She made her way back along the darkness of Alton Square. Most of the houses were dark, and nobody was to be seen.

From a little way off came the sound of rapid footsteps. The step grew swifter, and there was the sound of another behind. As if by magic a half score of people seemed to spring from under the trees against the square yonder.

It all seemed like a dream to Hetty after, a confused mist out of which came two struggling figures, there was the flash of a knife, and Hetty, heedless of danger, darted forward with an idea of interfering.

The cry that rose to her lips was stifled, a firm

## A STAB IN THE DARK

hand grasped her arm, another was laid tightly over her mouth.

"You must say and do nothing," a hoarse voice whispered. "It is a fair quarrel and a fair punishment. Accept my deepest apologies for handling a lady so roughly, but I am but the creature of circumstance."

Hetty's heart was beating violently. The struggle seemed interminable, but in reality it was a mere matter of seconds. Then one figure fell to the ground and lay there rigid and motionless. It was too dark to see more than the outline of the tragedy, and almost before it had begun it had dissolved away, leaving only that ominously still figure lying prone in the roadway.

Hetty's antagonist had vanished also. He had gone clean out of sight before Hetty realised that she was free. Then she called loudly for help. A policeman came from somewhere, and Hetty was pouring out her tale.

"Seems pretty bad," said the policeman gruffly, as he flashed his lantern down on the white still face. "This here's a job for the ambulance."

He whistled again and again, and presently the ambulance came trotting up. It was only when the body was raised that Hetty recognized the white still face. With a thrill it came to her that she was looking at Balmayne.

She was conscious of no feeling of astonishment. At every turn she seemed to be brought into contact with the central figures of the Corner House tragedy. A sudden inspiration came to her.

"As it happens, I know the gentleman," she said. "When I was governess to the Countess Lalage's little girl he frequently came to the house."

I am a niece of Mr. Gilbert Lawrence, the novelist, who lives close by. There is a room to spare in his house, and this looks like a bad case. If you will follow me——”

The sergeant in charge of the ambulance had no objection to make. A little later and Balmayne was stripped and in bed. A doctor who had been summoned shook his head as he made his diagnosis of the wound.

“Critical,” he said. “There has been a great loss of blood, too. It is all a matter of constitution now. Till I can send a nurse in——”

Hetty nodded. She perfectly understood. And Bruce had often told her that she was one of the best nurses he had ever met. There was nothing to do for the moment beyond watching over the patient to see that no change occurred.

Hetty sat there all alone for some time wondering. It looked as if fate was playing into her hands. If the man lying at the point of death could only speak, if he could only be induced to do so.

Balmayne opened his eyes and looked languidly about him. It was quite evident that he had not the slightest idea what had happened.

“Where am I?” he murmured, faintly.

Hetty explained in a few words. The patient was not to talk. He was to lie there and try to sleep again. If he did so and obeyed instructions, before long he would be out and well again.

A queer smile played over the listener’s face.

“Till next time,” he said. “It’s all over with me. The pitcher has gone too often to the well, and it has got broken at last. And I deserved all I got—there is no question whatever about that.”

"You are not to say another word," Hetty said sternly.

"All right. Only that you are an angel of goodness. If I could only tell you——"

He lay back exhausted and closed his eyes again.



## CHAPTER LV

### THE CORNER HOUSE AGAIN

THERE was no chance for Balmayne from the first. He was perfectly conscious all the time ; he was to have anything that he required. He was absolutely cynical and callous as to the future. He had always played the coward's part all his life, and now, strangely enough, when he came to die he showed the greatest indifference.

He smiled into the face of the man whose good name he might have cleared, but he gave no sign. So hard and callous a nature was impervious to kindness. Anybody who did a kind action for its own sake was a fool in Balmayne's eyes.

There was only one that he cared to see, and that was Hetty. In a curious way the girl's goodness and purity appealed strongly to him. As to his future he cared nothing. He wanted to know if anything had been seen of Leona Lalage, and when Hetty replied to the contrary he seemed to be greatly astonished.

" You are sure she has not been near Lytton Avenue ? " he asked.

Hetty was quite sure of that. Only that day the magnificent decorations of No. 1, Lytton Avenue, had been sold on the premises, and nobody could

have been there besides those who were interested in the sale.

"Strange thing," said Balmayne to himself. "A most remarkable thing! Miss Lawrence, will you do a favour for me. I would not trust anybody else. But if you will give me your promise I shall be easy. There is only one thing I have done that I really am sorry for, and you can set it right for me."

"I will do anything I can to make your mind easy," Hetty said.

"Ah, you are a good girl. If I had seen more like you I should have been a better man. But I was brought up in a hard school. It's about Mamie. Did it ever strike you that the child was no relation to Leona Lalage?"

"My uncle has always said so," Hetty replied.

"And he is perfectly right. That wonderful man always is right. Mamie is the only child of a sister of mine who lives in Florence. I wanted her once to impoverish herself to help me in one of my schemes, and she refused. By way of revenge I had her child stolen. That is some four years ago. She never knew I had a hand in it; she deems Mamie to be dead. When I am gone I want you to write to my sister and tell her what I am saying. Only you must get the address."

"Only tell me," Hetty exclaimed. "Poor woman! What is the address?"

"I cannot tell you from memory. But I am going to ask you to find the address. You know the little bedroom I used to occupy at the top of the Lytton Avenue house. There is a cupboard in the corner, and the board next the fireplace comes up. In the recess you will find a little box full

of papers. On one paper is my sister's address. The other papers I will ask you to burn unread."

"If I could get into the house," Hetty said, "I would cheerfully do what you ask."

"That is quite easy. I have a latchkey in my waistcoat pocket. You have only to go and get the papers, and nobody will be any the wiser. I felt quite sure you would do this thing for me."

Balmayne murmured something more and closed his eyes. When the nurse came up to him an hour later he was dead. He had passed away quietly in his sleep. How he came by his death, and who his assailants were nobody knew. There were many dark passages in that dark life known only to itself and its Maker.

It was a few days later before Hetty thought of her promise to Balmayne. It was a fine bright afternoon with a strong sunshine, so that even the deserted house in Lytton Avenue looked almost cheerful. With a feeling that she might have been taken for a burglar or a house-breaker, Hetty let herself in.

Everything was gone, even to the electric fittings. The place was dismantled and dirty, the floors grimy with the tramp of many feet. A door closed with a sullen bang, and Hetty started.

"How dreadful it all looks!" she murmured. "I hope I shall never see it again. Some houses seem to be given over to misery and crime. Now to find those papers."

The little room was at the top facing the blank windows of the Corner House. Hetty had no difficulty in finding the box, and a very brief search showed the address she was looking for. The box she emptied in the grate and set fire to the

contents with a match she had brought for the purpose.

She watched the flames die away, and turned to go. As she did so she looked out for a moment at the Corner House. The sun was shining strongly on the grimy windows. It seemed as if somebody was moving inside. Hetty was certain that she could see a shadowy form there.

She waited just for a moment in eager expectation. There was the form again, and then the spurt and flare of gas. What would anybody want gas for at this time of the day? The question was answered immediately, for a hand went over the gas flame holding something that looked like a kettle to the flame. Then the hand disappeared and nothing more was to be seen, despite Hetty's patience.

She pondered over this discovery as she went home. It might mean a lot, it might mean a very little. It was more than possible that Mr. Charlton had left a caretaker in possession of the house with a view to avoiding further incursions upon his possessions. If so, that casual way of boiling a kettle was quite the course a caretaker would adopt.

All the same, Hetty decided to speak of her discovery to Lawrence. He was busy at his desk when she returned. He looked up quickly, for there was an expression on Hetty's face that told of some discovery.

"I have been to Lytton Avenue," she said, "to get that address I told you of. And then I made a discovery. Uncle, how long has there been a caretaker on those premises, who boils a kettle by the ingenious expedient of holding it over the gas until it is hot enough?"

Lawrence threw up his pen with a cry of delight. "You've made a more wonderful discovery than you know," he said. "What a splendid scheme, and how foolish of me not to think of it before. My dear child, you have found the hiding place of Leona Lalage!"

## CHAPTER LVI

### NOW THEN !

**T**HE time had come. Leona Lalage knew it as well as if she had seen the writing on the wall. This man had come for her ; she would have no time to make her peace with the world. When he had his say he would drive his knife into her heart, and there would be an end of it.

" I—I thought you were in prison," she gasped.

" Oh, then you knew that I was in England ? "

René replied. " I have been in prison for some time, otherwise you would have done less mischief. Woman, what has become of my brother—your husband ? "

She did not reply for a moment. Her courage was coming back to her, as it always did when the stress of danger was great. Hard-pushed and beaten down as she was, she did not wish to die. She had been crushed flat to earth before, and yet she had recovered.

If she could only gain time ! If she could only manage to throw dust in the eyes of this man ! She would ask no questions, because that would be only by way of making admissions. She must feel her way in the dark.

And there was no avenue of escape whatever.

She was alone with this man in a dark, deserted house. She had come there for a few needed trifles that she had left behind. Nobody had seen either of them enter. Why, it was a very premium upon murder and the lust for revenge !

"Where is my brother ?" René repeated doggedly.

"You know very well where your brother is," Leona replied. "He is dead. He died in a house that is very close to here."

"He did not die, woman. He was foully murdered."

"Why should I deny it ?" Leona said boldly. "My husband was murdered. He was slain by Dr. Gordon Bruce for the sake of his money."

René sneered. He crossed over to the door. Leona laughed aloud.

"Oh, I have not the slightest idea of trying to escape," she said. "Why should I ? I am entirely innocent of the death of your brother."

"You lured him to the Corner House and drugged him. You kept him prisoner."

"I admit it. Leon discovered my whereabouts, and that I was apparently rich and prosperous. He demanded large sums of money. As a matter of fact I was driven to my wits' ends for cash then, and I refused. I had to drug him and detain him to still that fool's tongue of his. He might have done me a grave mischief. Then I had a bit of luck, and I gave Leon four hundred sovereigns. He knew where you could be found ; he told me he wanted to send half to you. I allowed him to go so that he could change his gold into notes for the purpose."

"Yes, yes," René said impatiently, "I know all that. Why did you kill him ?"

"Why should I have killed him?" was the cool response. "At the rate he was going he would have drunk himself to death in another week."

The rage and lust for vengeance was only smouldering in René's eyes now. It was just possible that he had made a mistake after all."

"But you were in the house," he said, "disguised as a Spanish woman——"

"Of course I was. Leon and myself had come to an understanding. He was going abroad after he had sent you the money. At great risk to myself I passed between here and the Corner House. I had to disguise myself. And when everything was ready Leon got at the brandy bottle again. For some nights he had not slept. When I got to the Corner House late that night Leon was practically dead. Ah, better for me if I had left him to die."

The passionate despair of the tones touched René. It did not seem possible to the man that this woman was acting.

"But I didn't do anything of the kind," Leona resumed. "I had Balmayne to back me up. He played the part of a deaf mute servant for me and fetched Dr. Bruce in the motor car. When Bruce came I departed, at least I left him on the premises. I dared not stay any longer. Half Bruce's story was a clever lie. He only told a portion of it. And it has been proved beyond doubt that the notes Leon intended to send to you were paid by Dr. Bruce to a firm in the Tottenham Court Road for some furniture. I am not romancing; you can see all this in the papers. Every one of those missing notes had Dr. Bruce's signature on the back. How do you get over that?"



René was silent for a moment. The woman's tongue was getting round him. And the practical part of her story was true.

"Now, listen to me," he said hoarsely. "I came here to kill you ; I came here to be avenged on my brother's murderer. When you saw me come in you were afraid."

"Because I read your errand in your eyes. But I am not afraid now."

"I don't think you are," René said, with grudging admiration. "Do you know how I got here ? We lured Balmayne into a trap under the idea that he was going to meet Ghetti, and I frightened your address out of him. He betrayed you."

The outburst of rage and scorn that René expected was not forthcoming. She smiled.

"Not in the way you mean," she said. "Balmayne has fooled you to save his own skin. He knew I should make my story good and prove my innocence, or he would never have sent you to meet me to-night."

"He had no what you call alternative," René growled.

"Yes, he had. That man is far cleverer than you. You are a child to him in cunning with all your boasted brains. If you kill me to-night you commit a cold-blooded murder. But you are not going to do anything of the kind."

It began to dawn upon René that the speaker was right. But he had another weapon still up his sleeves. His vengeance was not boiling within him as it had been, the red light no longer danced before his eyes.

"Get me food," he said ; "they starve you in those places yonder. I have tobacco, but my

stomach craves for food. Go and get me food. I'll go and lock the area door so that you may not give way to a desire to take the air. After that you can find me something."

## CHAPTER LVII

### A WAY OUT

**L**EONA retorted scornfully that she had no desire for flight. But as for the food that René demanded, it was a different matter. Still, Lytton Avenue had always been an extravagant household, and there might be welcome food here that would have been looked upon with disdain a few days ago.

There was nothing in the kitchen, but there were some boxes in the store-room beyond—a tin or two of sardines and some biscuits. Also in a wine cellar Leona found a flask or two of Chianti.

These she handed up to René, who returned to the dining-room with them. His mood had changed for the moment, but Leona was by no means out of danger yet. He might have been trying her all the time, he might be gloating over his vengeance. If she could only get rid of him, only scare him away.

She looked round as if seeking inspiration. She found it presently in the housekeeper's room. Just in front of her was the glitter and sheen of the telephone. The scheme that she wanted came to her like a flash.

She closed the door of the room softly and gave

a call. It was late at night, the exchange was quiet, and the answer came swiftly.

"Give me number—well, I forget the number," she said almost in a whisper. "I want to be put on to the nearest police-station quick."

"Vine Street," came the staccato reply. "Number 107—there you are. You are wanted Vine Street. . . . There you are—speak up."

A hoarse voice wanted to know what was wrong. But it mattered little what noise the speaker made at the other end of the wire so long as the caller spoke under her breath. She proceeded to explain.

"I'm at No. 1, Lytton Avenue," she said, "Countess Lalage's, you know. Yes, I am quite aware of the fact that it is an empty house. But there is a lot of stuff here that is worth fetching. In fact, there is somebody in the dining-room now. Are you going to do anything, or shall I give the alarm?"

The gruff voice suggested diplomacy, and promised immediate assistance. The caller had only to lie low and the desired aid should be on hand immediately. With a sense of pride and exultation Leona Lalage hung up the receiver and made her way to the dining-room.

Unless some unforeseen event took place she had saved her own life. But all the same there was danger. The police would probably get René, but also they might get her, which was a much more serious matter. She softly opened the catch of the back drawing-room window so that she could reach the garden.

René had opened the tin with the point of his knife, and was eating sardines and biscuits in a wolfish way. The Chianti he drank from the bottle.

"That is like a breath of old times," he growled,

as he finished the flask. "Let me light a cigarette and then we'll talk again. I am going to try you high, dear lady. I am going to test your story."

The old gleam was coming back to his eyes. Leona drew a deep breath. She had half expected this at the time; there was always the chance that this man knew a great deal more than she imagined. But help must be near her by this time, and she could always prevaricate.

"Pooh, I am not afraid," she said, with easy contempt. "Say on, say on."

"Ah, I am coming to that fast enough," René growled. "You say that you gave my brother four hundred pounds in gold——"

He paused as he saw Leona listening eagerly, not to himself, but to something outside. She was acting perfectly. There was just a suggestion of alarm in her manner that gave the situation.

"Didn't you hear something?" she whispered.

René shook his head. He could hear nothing at all. He said so impatiently. It seemed to him that his companion was playing with him.

"You or I, or both of us, are followed," she said. "Come this way. Peep out of the window without lifting the blind. What do you see?"

A policeman, standing rigidly outside the house, making signs with his hands to somebody. A sound of feet creeping down the area steps, the sudden pop and bang of a door forced in by a lever.

"Look to yourself," Leona cried, "they are here. There is a ladder in the garden that leads out to the roof. Never mind me."

René had no intention of doing anything of the kind. A dim, blue-coated figure stood in the doorway of the dining-room. With one spring René

was upon him, and carried him to the floor. There was a groan and a snarl and a snore, and the policeman lay on his back utterly oblivious for the moment.

René Lalage raced up the stairs. The house was not familiar to him, but he quite understood the meaning of what Leona had said about the ladder. As to the woman herself, she was quite at home there. She slipped into the back drawing-room, and thence across the hall into the drawing-room. The window catch was unfastened, as she had looked forward to this way out, and an instant later she was in the cool air. She could hear the shouts and yells in the house; presently she heard the cry of a policeman far overhead. René's means of escape had been discovered, and he was being pursued over the housetops.

"I hope they get him," Leona said between her teeth. "I hope they get him. And may they keep him for the rest of his life."

She hurried down the garden to the green gate. A little way beyond it was a policeman. No escape that way for the present. The garden was all right, but it would be light in two or three hours. There was a yell from the roof, and then a policeman's hoarse roaring, saying that he had "got him." The next time Leona looked out the policeman outside the green gate was gone.

When and where should Leona go now? She was utterly outcast. If it was possible——

"It is possible," she cried aloud. "Fool not to have thought of it before. What better hiding-place could I have than in the Corner House!"

## CHAPTER LVIII

### NEARING THE END

**R**ENE LALAGE made his way blindly up to the roof, where he lay breathless under the shadow of a chimney. It was too dark to study any further plan of escape, and too dark for a free dash for liberty. A false step and he might be dashed to the ground. Better be caught and taken back to gaol than that.

He waited for what seemed a long time, but was only a few minutes after all. Then there were voices coming nearer and nearer, one with a hoarse note of triumph as the ladder leading to the roof was found.

"This is the way," another gruff voice said. "He's here for any money."

A police helmet appeared cautiously above the skyline, followed by a bulky body. Then a lane of light played all over the roof. Closer and closer René nestled up in the shadow of the chimney. He was in the centre of the gleaming light now, and presently his figure grew distinct and clear.

"Come out of it, my lad," said the gruff one good-humouredly. "We've got you."

René rolled down the roof to a long ledge that the light had shown him. If he could run along that he could gain the next house, and go a deal

further. Then he might slip down another ladder, and so through a sleeping household to safety. He rocked unsteadily over on the ledge with his feet hanging perilously over the parapet; the next instant one of the police officers, at the risk of his neck, was upon him. René would have wriggled for his knife, but he dared not move.

"Come quietly," the officer suggested. "If you want to commit suicide go on acting like that. And if you drag me down that won't save your life."

Lalage saw the beautiful force of the argument. Besides, he was not anxious to die yet. His own bitter regret was that he had not completed his mission. If he had only known that his dalliance with opportunity had proved his own undoing he would have been moved to a deeper and fiercer anger.

"I'll come quietly," he said between his teeth. "Have you got the woman?"

The officer shook his head in a puzzled kind of way. He knew nothing about any woman. Perhaps those below had accounted for her. There were lights all over the house when Lalage was led down with the handcuffs on his wrists.

"Have you got the woman?" he asked again.

Nobody had seen anything of any woman. A light began to dawn upon René.

"I'm coming quietly," he said. "To show my friendly feeling, I don't mind telling you that you have made an important capture. Now, during the last hour have you heard anything of an escape from Holloway?"

The sergeant in charge of the party had heard all about that.



"Party of the name of Lalage?" he said. "What do you know about him?"

The prisoner struck his breast theatrically.

"Simply because I am that distinguished individual," he said. "I tell you that because in any case you must have found that out before long. My liberty comes to me in a way that is likely to prove useful. I came here to take a great revenge. Pah, I may be what you call criminal, but I am not a burglar. I have not sunk to that yet. I came here to see a woman. Have you got her?"

"Seen nothing of a woman," growled the sergeant.

"Oh, then I begin to have still deeper suspicions. How did you know I was here? I was certain that I was never tracked."

"Somebody in the house," the sergeant explained sketchily. "Caretaker or something of that kind, or so we imagined. Call on the telephone."

René broke out into sudden exultation. He saw it all now. He had been lulled into a false position of security, and Leona had slunk away and called for assistance on the telephone. He had not known that there was such a thing in the house. How she must have smiled at him in her sleeves all the time, knowing that his capture was certain, and that she had her own avenue of escape.

"What's this about a woman?" the sergeant asked.

René checked himself. He grew suddenly calm, but the effort threw him into a violent perspiration. Well, his time should come yet.

"Take me back to Holloway," he said, sullenly, "and ask your Prout to see me in the morning. Say it will be worth his while."

Prout came up smiling in the course of the next

afternoon. He was disposed to chaff his prisoner in a mild kind of way.

"The experience was worth the money," the latter said. "My friend had arranged everything. I got our dear Balmayne in our clutches within an hour. And I said to him, 'Dog, where is Leona Lalage?' And he professed not to know. But we had means of our own, you understand, to make him speak. And he spoke at last. He told me where to find her. And where do you think it was?"

"Well," Prout said thoughtfully, "seeing that you were traced to Lytton Avenue, I suppose that you found her there?"

"I did. So you see that she has not escaped from London. Perhaps you knew that before you came here. Anyway I have told you. And I'll tell you more if you are not aware of it already. Leona Lalage and the Spanish gipsy of the Corner House are one and the same woman."

Prout nodded. All this was no news to him. Lalage paced up and down the cell fiercely. His eyes were full of sullen fire.

"And she killed my brother," he said. "Oh, yes, there is no doubt about that. If I had not been a fool I should have been avenged last night."

"And spoilt my game," Prout said coolly. "Oh, you are going to have all you need in the way of revenge, but in a legitimate way. Within a few hours London is going to learn the mystery of the Corner House."

## CHAPTER LIX

### LIGHT IN THE CORNER HOUSE

GILBERT LAWRENCE had put away his books and papers with the air of a man who means to take a holiday. He did not seem in the least surprised.

"Are you astonished?" Hetty asked.

"Well, no," Lawrence said. "You see, the woman was taken by surprise, she was quite destitute so far as money was concerned at the time, and she must hide somewhere. At the same time we must not forget the cleverness of the woman with whom we are dealing. She would argue to herself that until she could communicate with some or another of her many accomplices there could be no safer hiding-place than the Corner House. The very audacity of it would put everybody off the scent. Charlton hates the place and does not go near it—nobody wants to go near it, in fact. So therefore it seems to me to be a natural thing to do."

Hetty permitted herself the luxury of a smile at Gilbert's expense.

"Then why did not you suggest a search there?" she asked.

"That is a very fair question," Lawrence admitted.

"I put that out of my mind because, as I told you before, the main scheme of the tragedy was taken from my skeleton plot. In that plot the cause of all the mischief goes back to hide in the very spot where the mischief was done. Now, in the course of my diplomacy I had to let the Countess know I had discovered that somebody had used my brain for inspiration. Under the circumstances she might not have carried the thing to the end."

"An additional proof of her clever and wonderfully logical mind," said Hetty.

"On the whole you are doing her no more than justice," said Lawrence. "Still, we do know where she is now, and I am going to see her. If she falls into the hands of Prout now, we shall never get her to speak, and therefore we shall have no end of trouble to clear Bruce's name as it should be cleared. I'll just run round and get Charlton to accompany me. And then for a thrilling interview."

Charlton complied without enthusiasm. In a few days he was going to have everything in the Corner House sold, and subsequently dispose of the property altogether. It was a little after four o'clock that he put his key in the latch, and the two entered. A casual glance did not disclose any marks of occupation, but there were traces of food in the kitchen and some utensils had evidently been used.

"Look at the bottom of those saucepans," said Lawrence. "See how they are smoked; at the same time there is no soot on them. Our quarry has not dared to light a fire by reason of the smoke. It is quite plain that Hetty was not mistaken when she said she saw a hand holding a kettle over the gas. And, by Jove, this kettle is warm still!"

For a long time a search of the house disclosed nothing. Up and down they looked, but no trace of Leona Lalage could be found. Under the tiles of the roof was a small closet, and in a vague kind of way Lawrence poked his stick in there. Something soft yielded to his touch.

"Will you kindly step out?" he suggested politely.

A dirty, grimy figure emerged, as unlike the dashing, brilliant Countess Lalage as could be well imagined. Her face was white and drawn, but nothing could dim the fire and flash of those wonderful dark eyes.

Ill and worn as she was she carried herself upright as if her black dress had been a Paris gown. There was a bitter little smile on her face. She was going to make the best fight she could under the circumstances, but she was beaten. She had come to the end of her resources, and nobody knew it better than herself.

"I expected this," she said. "I knew that it must come sooner or later. I am sorry that I cannot receive you in better fashion. Well, you have hunted me down. What do you propose to do now?"

"To listen to your story," said Lawrence.

"And if I refuse to tell you any story?"

"In that case I shall ask you to listen to mine with what patience you can. I have no desire to be in the least vindictive; it is a matter of indifference to me whether you stand in the dock or not. Personally I would go out of my way to save any woman from that indignity. But if you will have it you must."

"But I do not share these views," said Charlton.

"I recognise this woman now, though she no longer wears any disguise. There stands my wife's murderer. I shall never be content till the world knows that."

"I prefer to regard the lady for the present as Countess Lalage," said Lawrence. "But we can find a better place for discussion than this."

He stood aside politely for the woman to pass. She led the way in her imperious fashion as if they had been honoured guests of hers. She carried her dingy dress magnificently. In the drawing-room, Lawrence drew the blinds so that they could see better. The garish light of day shone on Leon Lalage's pale face, and disclosed the deep black lines under her splendid eyes. Only the flick and tremor of her lips betrayed her feelings. With her hands folded in her lap she waited.

"Are you not going to speak first?" Lawrence asked.

"No, I am not," came the slow reply. "Oh, you are a clever man, without doubt, and you have the air of one who holds all the cards. It will be a pleasure for me to listen to what you have to say."

Charlton rose; the woman's coolness and nerve were inflammable to him.

"I cannot stay here," he cried. "That woman maddens me. It brings back all the recollections that I am trying to forget. I shall forget myself——"

Lawrence laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Patience, a little patience," he whispered. "It is not for very long. You will please stay here and see a confession signed."

"My confession!" Leona Lalage cried.

"Even so, Madame. I make no idle boast.

Before I leave here the name of an innocent man will be cleared."

Leona Lalage smiled unsteadily. Her lips twitched horribly.

"Go on," she whispered. "Go on, mine enemy."

## CHAPTER LX

### NARROWED DOWN

**I**T was a curious scene, a scene to remember long afterwards. In all Lawrence's imaginative writing he had never constructed anything more striking than this. He was about to hear the story of a strange crime, and it could not be told in a better setting than the Corner House.

The garish sunlight struggled through the grimy panes. Under ordinary conditions the drawing-room was a luxurious one. But the fine dust of years had settled upon pictures and statues and upon the upholstery of the old Empire furniture. As Charlton paced to and fro a gossamer cloud of dust seemed to follow him.

In the centre of it all sat Leona. Lawrence could see now that there were marks and bruises on her face, the result of the auto-car accident, which showed out now there was no artist to attend to them.

She sat with her hands folded in her lap grimly, patiently waiting for the novelist to speak. He produced a cigarette.

"You won't mind?" he said.

"I will have one with you," Leona replied. "That will be more comfortable. Now, will you be so good as to proceed?"



"We will go back to the beginning," Lawrence began. "Here is a very beautiful and fascinating woman, living all alone in her wealth. Her talents and her loveliness have taken her into the cream of society."

"Which isn't worth the trouble when you've got it."

"There I perfectly agree with you. But the lady I speak of is bound to lead. Wherever she is and whatever walk of life she finds herself in, she is bound to lead. She flashes out and dazzles London. She lives in a fine house and entertains royally. But there is one thing that puzzles me. Why does the lady reside so far from Park Lane or Belgravia or Mayfair?"

"Lytton Avenue houses are large and they have gardens."

Lawrence smiled as he flicked off the end of his cigarette.

"It is very good of you to assist me in my deductions," he said. "But that does not quite account for everything; in fact, it accounts for nothing. There are finer houses in the localities I speak of, with better gardens. And a lady who pays for nothing has no need to study economy."

Leona laughed outright.

"I have paid for nothing for years," she said. "*L'audace, l'audace et toujours l'audace!* But for circumstances over which I had no control I might have gone on to my death. But proceed. I am interested."

"Let us hope the story will proceed in grip as it proceeds," Lawrence murmured. "I was interested too. This, I say in effect to myself, is a splendid woman in a halo of mystery. I must study

her with a view to a future heroine. I see her in the park where I can study her features. After a time I come to the conclusion that I have taken up a magnificent adventuress."

"Never a truer word in your life," Leona sneered.

"Well, I am glad not to have offended you. Incidentally I am not the less interested because my young relative Hetty Lawrence holds a position of some trust in the house of the heroine of the story. I say to myself that I must know the Countess Lalage. We become quite friends, in fact."

Leona smiled in a queer, strange way.

"Oh, yes," she said slowly. "We were friends. I bear you no malice. But if I had only guessed—well, we should have seen something fresh in the way of obituary notices."

"You would have removed me," Lawrence asked.

"Ay, I should. I should have put you from my path. Make no mistake about that. But it is no use repining over that. Go on."

"Well, I study you. Then I begin to see my way. It was only the kind of idea that would creep into the brain of a novelist who does not scruple to endow even his most intimate friends with ferocious qualities for business purposes. But I allowed myself to think that the reason why you had come to Lytton Avenue was because you were in some way interested in the Corner House. There you have the first faint indication of the shaping of the story.

"Here in the dull and gloomy Corner House, with its dark and gloomy tragedy, cheek by jowl with the hardness and glitter and brilliancy of Lytton Avenue. If my adventurer wants a big dark cupboard to hide things, where can she have a better

one than the Corner House! If I bore you——”

“Bore me!” Leona cried. “Never more interested in my life. Subtlety of this kind always appeals to me. Proceed.”

“Again, it is a little strange that I have already built a romance round the Corner House before the heroine came along. I told you once that I had known the owner of the Corner House before the tragedy. I had my heroine and I had my plot. A plot of vengeance and wounded pride.

“But stranger still to say, the live heroine, yourself, is more deeply interested than I imagined. We will say that she did a foolish thing. She fell in love with one of her own guests—Dr. Bruce, to be plain.”

Leona quivered but said nothing. It was only by a motion of her hand that she signalled Lawrence to proceed.

“Well, this love came—the wild, unreasoning passion of the South. Dr. Bruce was pushed on, his fortune was being rapidly made. Then my heroine makes a discovery in strict accordance with the conditions of the game. Her governess and the doctor are affianced to one another.”

“It is always thus in books,” Leona said, with a hard smile.

“Inevitably. But you were not in a book, unfortunately. You were flesh and blood and you took your own way. You thought you had been slighted. You made up your mind to get your revenge at any price. All the same, you could not see your way. You wanted a neat plot to get Bruce into trouble, for he had bad taste in not caring for you. You used the simple expedient of stealing mine.”

## CHAPTER LXI

### LOGIC

**"JUST** a moment," Leona said eagerly. "Suppose I deny that. How are you going to prove that I did so?"

"I am coming to that," Lawrence said, lighting a fresh cigarette. "As soon as Bruce was in trouble and the plot began to reel off I saw that it was mine. Of course there were large varyings in the details, but the scheme was mine. It was even laid on the same spot as my skeleton story. When I grasped that, I knew quite well that somebody must have stolen my plot."

"But why must it have been me?" Leona asked.

"Well, in the first place, because woman's instinct helped me. My niece said for some time that you were deeply in love with Dr. Bruce and that she feared for him—item the first. Then I recollected telling you some details of my story plot—item the second. I came to the conclusion you had stolen my plot. And you stole it on the very night that I told you the main incidents."

"How did you find that out?" Leona cried, startled off her balance.

"Glad you admit it," Lawrence said calmly.

"When I went to look for the synopsis I knew per-

fectly well that I should not find it. And yet it was there only the day before, as I recollected afterwards. Now, how did you get it? The night in question you were only out of the room a little time, and yet in that little time you contrived to lay your hands on my notes."

"This," Leona murmured, "this is quite thrilling."

"Well, I promise you I shall be more thrilling later on," said Lawrence. "I had to settle that part before I went any further. I tried to recall the conversation. How could you have got into my rooms? Then it came to me like a flash. A journalist who stood by asked me where I carried my latchkey—a joking suggestion that he would steal my plot. I said that it was in the ticket pocket of my overcoat."

"Then I began to understand. You were only a little time from the room. Why did you go from the room? Ostensibly to see Captain Gifford off in his new autocar. Here was a possible solution. I saw Gifford later, and he told me that you had been larking off in his car for twenty minutes—long enough at that time of night to get to my chambers and back easily.

"That is logical, at any rate. But to go further. You borrowed a man's coat to put over your shoulders. And the coat you borrowed was mine with the latchkey in the pocket. That I got from a footman. And when I came to look for my skeleton plot, it was gone. Then I knew where I had to search. Leona Lalage was at the bottom of the Corner House mystery. It was her hand that I had to force. Once that was done the rest was easy."

"So far you have made it quite plain," Leona

murmured, "but I fail to see that all the rest was easy."

"Easy to me," said Lawrence, "whose plot had been stolen. Remember it was really I who planned that business of palming the notes on to Bruce."

"Of course, of course," Leona murmured with her hand to her head. "My mind has not been quite so clear for the last few days. Go on."

"Well, a man had been murdered at the Corner House which was not a detail of my plot. I saw that man, and Miss Lawrence had seen him, too. She saw him, you will remember, one night in one of the windows of the Corner House. She saw a struggle go on there. The other man was no doubt Balmayne."

Leona inclined her head as if in consent.

"Afterwards, which is much more to the point, my niece saw Leon Lalage here. I had better call him your husband, because really there is no denying that. The man was in your house in the morning room, and Hetty saw him. After the business of the notes came out and the story of the Spanish gipsy was told, I knew perfectly well what had taken place. You had called Bruce in to your drunken husband by means of your new motor, with Balmayne playing the deaf mute. After Bruce was gone you killed the man with a knife you procured at Rosser's, in Regent Street. I find the knife in the dry well behind the house."

Leona said nothing. There was a queer, strained look, half of admiration, on her face. But she uttered no protest, no denial.

"Now we come to the marvellous evidence against Bruce. There you had stolen my plot, body and boots. Bruce is poor, so was my hero.

You find out all about that picture he bought, and Balmayne or somebody—it does not in the least matter who—in the guise of a Dutchman puts Bruce in possession of £200. These notes he places in his pocket.

“Later on he is called to the Corner House, where he is received by the Spanish lady, and then he has to handle a man in the last stage of collapse. The latter part of the plot is your own, and from an artistic point of view, a great improvement on mine. Murder and robbery make a fine combination. You had previously arranged the proceedings, the notes and their numbers—adopted or suggested doubtless by you as a precaution—the letter to René Lalage and all to be found on the body. If you can plant those numbered notes on Bruce, then he is ruined for all time.

“Having gone so far, the rest is easy. And this is where my scheme comes in again. Bruce has to take his coat off. In the guise of the Spanish lady—a slight variation of my mysterious woman—you hang his coat up carefully in a closet for him. You knew that £200 in notes was in that pocket, notes that Bruce had come by quite honestly. The rest is easy.”

Leona bent forward to listen. Even Charlton seemed to have forgotten his troubles for the moment. A beam of light illuminated his sombre face.

“Go on,” said Leona. “Nothing seems to be concealed from you. Now please tell me what happens next.”

“The simplest thing in the world. You took the packet of notes from Bruce’s pocket and supplied their place with the forty £5 notes, the numbers of which were sent out in the letter which Leon

Lalage had intended for his brother. And when Bruce went away he had that damning evidence in his pocket. And that is how that vile, shameless thing was done."



## CHAPTER LXII

### CONFESSION

**F**OR the first time Lawrence showed signs of indignation. Cool and logical as he had hitherto been, he could not quite restrain himself in the presence of this woman, who had no shame or remorse, or anything save admiring curiosity.

"Directly Bruce told his story," he went on presently, "I knew exactly what had happened. I knew all about the motor car also. Then it was time for me to act. I was using the house as a kind of trap for you one night when Mr. Charlton appeared. He was good enough to pardon the liberty we had taken and to tell us his story. Then I began to see my way pretty clear. It was I who caused you to be informed about the missing diamonds being still in the well. I had found out that you were in desperate need of money. Isidore let me into that, also through him I got to know Maitrank. You came for the diamonds, but you did not get the real ones, for the simple reason that I had already been down the well and got them for myself. They were simply and plainly set, so that I had no trouble in getting paste imitations.

"So far, so good. Maitrank comes on the scene and asks for his money. You have no money, therefore you give him your diamonds. You try to get them back from him, but you fail in the long run, owing to the courage of a young girl, who has watched the whole proceedings. I have purposely refrained from dwelling upon the valuable aid Miss Lawrence has given us all through."

Leona passed her tongue over her dry lips.

"I wish I had known," she murmured. "Oh, I wish I had known."

"I dare say," said Lawrence, drily, "but you didn't know. There would have been another murder on your soul had it not been for my niece. Maitrank was furious. But he was a valuable ally to me, in fact I calculated on that. By his means I forced a confession from you that it was yourself who paid the rest of those notes to Isidore, and this I can prove out of your own mouth, by the production of that tuberose perfume. You were mad and desperate that night to part with the last of your store."

"How did you know it was the last of my store?" Leona cried.

"Why, it could not logically have been otherwise. Would you have produced those notes above all others if they had not been the last you possessed?"

"True," Leona murmured, "true. You are too strong for me."

"Meanwhile the clouds were gathering around you. Prout finds your husband's brother by a happy chance. Once he has done this, things become easy for us. The more easy they become for us the more desperate they grow for you. Then you decide that you must recover those notes from

Isidore. You take out your motor car, so cunningly disguised in blacklead——”

“That is true ; but how did you know ? ”

“From Miss Lawrence’s evidence at the first inquest. Also the evidence of the reporter. The car was draped, they said. In places it shone. Those places were where the lead was rubbed off ; you could make the car sombre black and brilliantly light at will.

“You used to lock it up in the yard here. We find a fresh cake of blacklead in the scullery, which completely puzzled me for a little time. When I heard about the autocar I knew. But we are getting away from the point. When luck turned against you it did so completely. You got into Isidore’s rooms, only to find Mr. Charlton there, who was waiting for him. Again fortune favoured us. Mr. Charlton gave the alarm, and you had to fly. At length the motor was abandoned, and its secret disclosed. You disappeared. Sooner or later-I was certain of seeing you again.”

“You were. Why ? I was quite certain——”

“Because my desperate woman hides by the scene of her crime. I was a little dubious about you because that comes out in my plot. Perhaps you counted upon that, and the fact I should not look for you here, after all. It was a game of subtle cross-purposes. But I did look for you here, and I found you. It is a rather long story that I have had to tell, but it has been necessary. And if I repeated it in a court of law I am afraid it would cause you serious inconvenience.”

“It would hang me,” Leona cried. “Why should I be afraid to confess it ? You have been too strong for me. Every word you have said is true,

every step you have taken has been fully justified. I was going to defy you at first, but I am not such a weak and silly fool as that. I have had a clever antagonist who has beaten me all along. I have been criminally careless. If I had taken the trouble I could have evolved as good a plot as one of your own."

"I fancy you could," said Lawrence.

"I am absolutely certain of it. I took you for a dreamer. I argued that if I used this thing you would not be an atom the wiser. People who talk so much about their own work as you do are generally very foolish."

Lawrence looked a little confused for a moment. He knew his own weakness in that respect.

"I have little more to say," he went on. "I have written out a confession for you in a more condensed form than I have explained to you. I thought that you might like to sign it. Not that it much matters whether you do or not."

"The more reason why I should do so," Leona sneered. "If it did really matter, I would see my right arm rotting off before I put a pen to paper. But I have had a most worthy antagonist, and I know the game too well not to play it correctly. Give me a pen and let me finish it."

Lawrence took a fountain pen from his pocket. Without the slightest hesitation and in a good dashing hand Leona Lalage appended her signature. It was a great deal more firm and true than either of the witnessing signatures.

"Now you go and leave me," she cried. "I am sick of the sight of your faces. Give me a chance. Let me have an hour's start."

Charlton spoke for the first time.

"Never," he cried, "there is another name to clear——"

"Which I shall be able to do," Lawrence interrupted.

"And let that woman go? I tell you never. The verystones in the street would cry out at me! You hear that knocking at the door? Go and open it."

Lawrence crossed and opened the street door. Prout stood before him.

## CHAPTER LXIII

### A FINAL VERDICT

"GOT a message from Mr. Charlton to follow him here," Prout gasped. "You don't mean to say that you've got her here, sir?"

"Indeed, he has, Mr. Prout," Leona said coolly. "Will you come in? We have been having a pleasant conversation with some pleasing confessions. Have you come for me?"

The woman was smiling now quite freely. All traces of passion and anxiety were gone. She knew the end had come, and she was prepared to accept it without complaint. Prout looked a little awkward as he bowed.

"I shall not slip through your fingers in the same way as before," said Leona. "I flatter myself I did you very neatly when you called upon me in Lytton Avenue. But all the same I am going to escape you."

"It's my duty, madame," Prout began, "to ask you to——"

"Accompany you. Presently, but not quite in the way you imagine. I have made my confession in a way that Mr. Lawrence thoroughly appreciates. It was I who murdered Leon Lalage, my husband, in this house; it was I who palmed

those notes off on Dr. Bruce. No reason to tell you why now. And it was I in this very house who robbed my late mistress of her jewels and forged the letter from her husband that caused her to take poison. After that I have no more to say. Gentlemen, I am much obliged by your kind attention, and I say farewell to you, thus."

There was a warning shout from Lawrence, who dashed forward and grasped the speaker by the wrist. But she wrenched herself away from him, and placed the table between them. Prout was looking on in a confused kind of way.

"Close with her," yelled Lawrence, "she's got poison in her hand."

Leona Lalage laughed aloud. She threw back her head, and a few drops from the little bottle were tilted between her teeth. Almost instantly she grew livid.

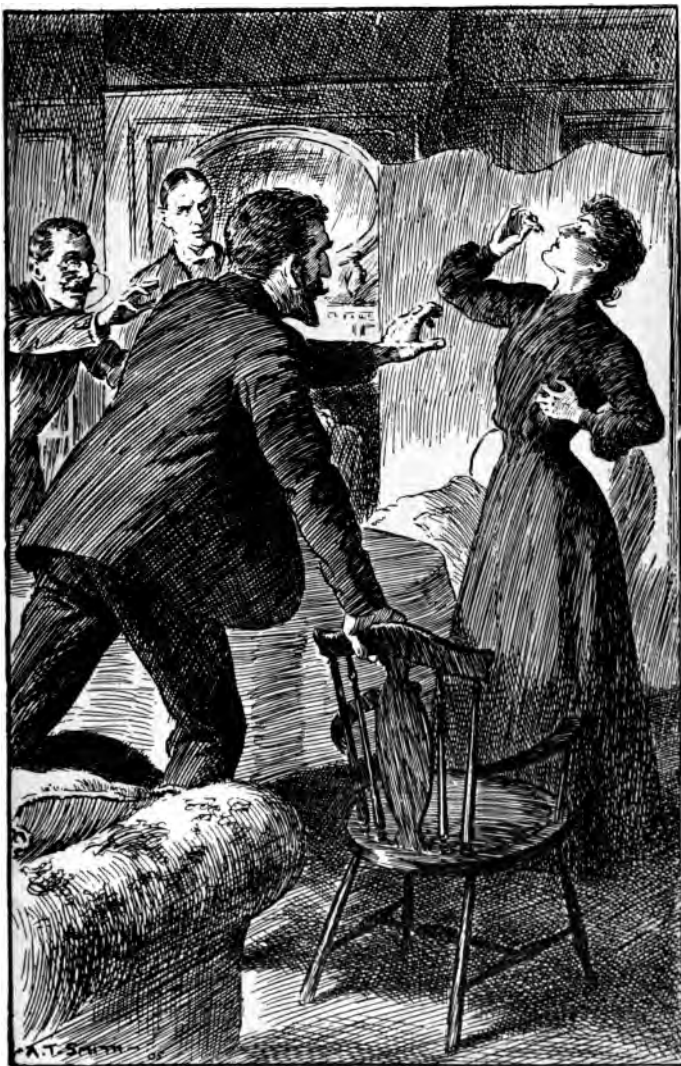
"Swift and sure," she said, "it's prussic——"

She said no more. The ashy pallor of her skin grew whiter, there was a look of horror, swift as summer lightning, in her splendid eyes. Then she pitched forward, there was a thud and a cloud of dust, and she lay there rigid, motionless.

"Dead," whispered Prout, "dead instantly. It was prussic acid. The whole room reeks of it. Perhaps it was as well to finish it this way. There'll be an inquest now, and the whole business will come out."

They laid the body on a sofa, and the trio left the Corner House. They were very silent as they walked along.

"Some houses are accursed," Charlton said at length. "Mine has been the abode of mystery and crime for years. I shall never enter it again."



“Swift and sure,” she said, “it’s prussic——” —Page 314







And may this be the last of the evils connected with my house."

"Must attend the inquest, sir," said the practical Prout. "Still, if that was my house, I'd pull it down if I couldn't sell it."

Gordon Bruce was returning from an important consultation when he first heard the news. It was the sensation of the hour. Public attention in the Corner House mystery had never relaxed; on the flight of Countess Lalage it had doubled. Where had she gone, and what was the true solution of the mystery were the only questions asked.

And here it was all out in the lurid light of day. Dramatic arrest of the Countess. The suicide and confession. It was flaring in the evening papers—the boys were yelling at the top of their voices in the street. The din of it filled Bruce's ears. "Confession of the crime." "The confession of the murder." "The mystery of the motor explained." "Dr. Bruce cleared of the cruel charge." It seemed strange to Gordon to hear his name yelled out like this in his own ears. He had a paper thrust into his hands.

He bought one eagerly enough, and stood spell-bound on the pavement whilst he read. It was all here, even down to a signed copy of the confession. Lawrence had seen to that. Bruce turned into his club in a dazed kind of way. The smoking-room was full, he was the centre of a group, all of which seemed eager to shake hands. It was all so sudden that Bruce was not himself yet.

He got away at length to his own room. The servants greeted him with smiling faces, the house-keeper was in tears.

"Not that I ever believed it," she said. "Never from the first. And now you'll have the finest practice in London. I'd quite forgot, sir, to say that there is a young lady waiting for you."

There was no need for Lawrence to ask who was waiting for him. He closed the door behind him, and a second later Hetty was in his arms. Then there was a long, clinging caress, and their lips met in the sweetest of embraces. It was a long time before either of them spoke. Hetty's eyes were full of happy tears.

"I shall realise it presently," Bruce said at length. "My darling, I should never have had my good name cleared thus but for you. You are the bravest girl in the world. And all those dangers for me!"

"I was not afraid, dearest," Hetty said. "I thought of you. I knew it would come right. I felt from the first that the truth would come out. And now all those people have gone. Bruce, you will not be sorry for this after——"

The telephone jangled sharply. Bruce listened to the message with a smile.

"The Duchess wants me to see her boy at once," he said. "The Duchess, you know; the one who so annoyed you at Lady Longmere's party."

Hetty clapped her hands joyfully.

"That is a good omen," she said. "They will be all after you now, dear."

Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed with happiness. Bruce looked at her with pride and love in his eyes.

"I dare say," he said. "And it has been a long, trying time. Hetty, we shall be able to get

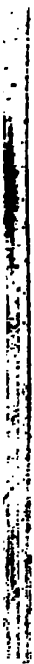
married as I planned. What do you say to July or——”

“You had better,” Hetty said demurely—  
“you had better run away and see to your  
Duchess.”

THE END













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